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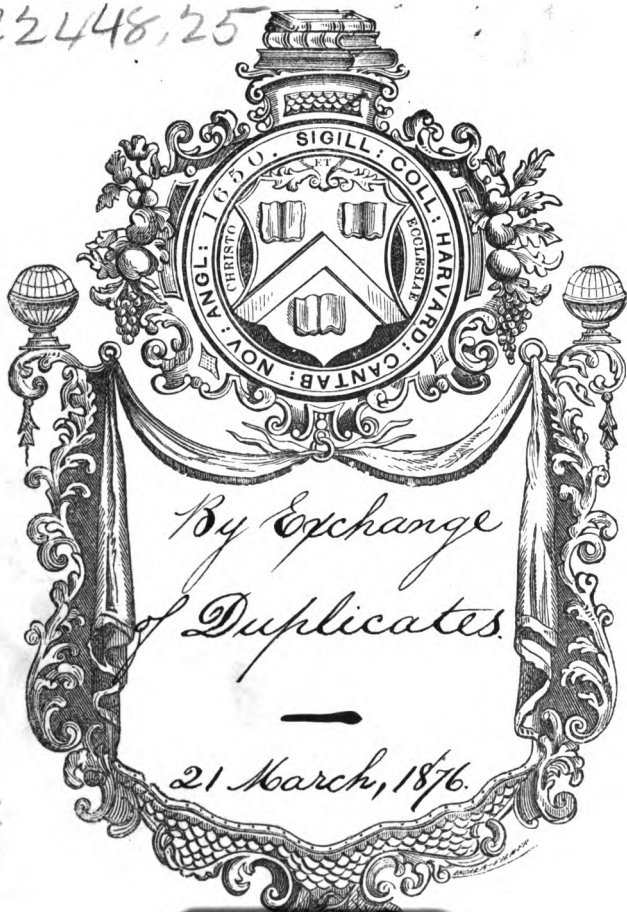
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MY LITTLE LADY.

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BY THE

AUTHOR OF "MY LITTLE LADY"

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"O fearful meditation! where, alack,
Shall Time's best jewel from Time's chest lie hid?
Or what strong hand can hold his swift foot back?
Or who his spoil of beauty can forbid?
O none, unless this miracle have might,
That in black ink my love may still shine bright."

SHAKESPEARE.



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HENRY HOLT AND COMPANY

1876.

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PROLOGUE.

HE who writes these pages, searching through the dimness of the separating years for the memories of his youth, feels like one who, sailing from his native shores in darkest night, presently sees the day break once more over the grey waters, and the well-loved land rise dream-like from the waves. To that lonely watcher, looking back with forlorn eyes, perhaps, with an inexpressible longing in his heart, the mists seem all at once to lift, to melt away, revealing a land ruddy in the ruddy dawn, watched over by the morning star, a land fair with the promise of flowery meadows, of white blossoming trees ; he seems once more, as in a dream, to breathe the scent of dewy hawthorn in the glen, to see the small folded daisies in the grass, to hear the chorus of awakening birds, to taste the nameless rapture of the summer dawn. Alas ! the shore recedes, the morning star sinks down, winds and waves pipe and moan around. A tardy sun will presently gleam again, kindly breezes will yet waft the wanderer on his way, but the gracious promise that crowned the glory of that morning land is gone for ever.

So he, who writes these words, sees once more, as in a clear vision, the blossoming years, the far gleaming spaces, the storms and darkness of his youth.

I HAVE a little daughter, Fanny, a trim little maiden of seven years old, with light curling hair and blue eyes, and shining black shoes, in which she goes trotting round her father's studio looking at the pictures he is painting and giving her opinion on them very freely and more honestly, perhaps, than some of his critics. Fanny does not, indeed, profess to care much about pictures, and owns at times with great frankness that she thinks them all very dull ; but she has her favorites among them nevertheless, and is not a little affronted when coming again, as sometimes happens, to look at one of these, she finds it has been sent away, never to return. In her disappointment, she will turn then to a half-finished portrait which, as it always stands in the same place, it pleases the child to call her own. "This is my picture," she will say, standing to contemplate it with her hands clasped behind her back, "my beautiful Princess Ersilia. What was her other name, papa? The name I always forget?"

"Princess Zaraikine," he says. He has answered the same question many times before, but no doubt the queer syllables slip out of the child's little brain.

"Princess Zaraikine," she repeats, "I like Princess Ersilia best—my beautiful Princess and cousin. Why have you never finished the picture, papa?"

"It was not I who began it, Fanny," he answers, "it was painted by my master, a far greater artist than I, who did not live to complete it. He died many years ago."

"185—" she says, spelling out a date in the corner of the picture, "why that is—let me see—that is more than twenty years ago. But I know whom you mean, papa, the gentleman who used to live in this room, and made those funny sketches on the wall. You have never finished those either ; why don't you, papa? You can paint very nicely too," and then, without waiting for an answer, Fanny skips off to the window, and peeps through the shutter to look down into the street below, a Paris street, where she can see the winter sun shining on

white houses and porte-cochères, soldiers passing, ladies walking, carriages rattling by—it is more amusing to Fanny than all the pictures in the world.

Presently her *bonne* knocks at the door, "It is time for Mademoiselle to come for her walk." Mademoiselle jumps up joyfully from the window and runs to get ready. She climbs a chair that she may put her arms round her father's neck, and kiss him before she goes out. She pulls his grizzled beard, and the locks that are getting white on his temples and thin on the top of his head; she dives into his pockets to find *sous* wherewith to buy cakes in the Champs Elysées. Fanny and her father are very fond of each other, for they are almost alone in the world, and the little maiden still wears a black frock for the mother who died scarcely a year ago. But they have not much to say to each other nevertheless, and he sometimes thinks that the child is happier with her dolls, and her rags, and her nurse, than during the dutiful half-hour she spends in the studio where there are a hundred things her busy fingers may not touch, and where a grim, silent papa sits and stands painting all day long. She skips gleefully away now, the sound of her chatter and laughter dying in the distance. Presently will be heard the clatter of little feet as she returns from her walk, but no more will be seen of her till she comes in her little blue dressing-gown to wish her father good night, and to roast chestnuts on the stove. It is Fanny's winter treat, and the one moment in the day, perhaps, when she thinks a papa good for something. She will know better a few years hence, when she will come to him for ball-dresses, trinkets, opera-tickets, what not—already he foresees the time when she will plait up her pretty hair, put jewels in her ears, and satin slippers on her feet, and be content with nothing less than two balls a night.

Fanny then runs joyfully away; but though the child is gone, her careless questions, her heedless words still echo in her father's ears; and presently, as it grows dusk, he lays aside his brushes, he lights his pipe, and sitting down by the fire, he begins to think with tender-

ness and melancholy of a time five-and-twenty years ago. And as he thinks, the little parable that is written above comes into his head, for it is a time that has in it a glow as of red morning-clouds, the glow of the boy's first love.

This lonely man who sits smoking and dreaming over the fire, had a passionate love-story in his youth ; but a sudden darkness fell on it, and out of it he has saved no token such as some men cherish and forget—no flower, or knot of faded ribbon, or lock of hair. The shining eyes, at whose light he worshipped, never brightened nor fell at his approach ; the fair, kind hand that frankly met his own never trembled at his touch, and it is less of himself than of another, whose name passed into silence years ago, that he thinks, looking back upon a past in which his own share was too often one of youthful passion, error, folly.

Out of that past he himself alone survives and remembers ; for a fate, relentless to death, swept across his path, and he found himself alone among alien lives that had no conscience of his past. In this very studio, sacred to him through the memories that make the pathos of familiar rooms, where in the course of years many have come and gone and one life alone remains—in this very room, where the portfolios still bear that silent name, and the sketches on the walls were traced by a hand long since quiet, a new life is springing up ; a child's eyes are busy day by day weaving new fancies, new associations, investing all around her with the romance of a fresh child's world that knows nothing of the years that have been. Shall the memory of those years die for ever ?

As he thinks of these things, this lonely dreamer rises and paces the dim room. In all these years it is scarcely altered ; the very shadows are unchanged, and the fire-light throws the same wavering outlines on the same accustomed spots. The little old piano in the corner by the window whose worn notes jingle into strange discords now, once made harmonious answer to slender fingers that touched it ; on the top lie some dusty folios

of music, on which the name Ersilia Zاراikine can still be read in faded ink. (A woman's jealous hand once removed them, but somehow they found their way back to the old place again.) In yonder drawer lies a little gold-fitted *étui*, and a half-embroidered handkerchief; they were left there more than twenty years ago by a hand that never cared to reclaim them. This man is no solitary hermit watching over the relics of his dead; the eager life of his contemporaries has claimed and had in him a willing share; but a profound melancholy stirs within him now, as he contrasts this passionless indifference of his inanimate surroundings with the passionate onward sweep of events, which has left only these barren landmarks to show the spot once made radiant by the fleeting presence of a fair and noble woman.

To her memory he devotes these pages. He loved that noble lady, for whose most sweet and pure sake he believes in the Heaven that opened to receive her, in the fair saints who thronged to welcome her, in the golden light in which she moves amongst the angels or muses apart amidst the immortal flowers. He loved her at a time when life was intense with the enthusiasms that give a purpose to youth, and keen with the joys and sorrows that are the inspiration for all the dim years that come after—the years that seem to mock men by the irony of their contrast with his splendor of early hopes. He loved her, and to him she was herself the inspiration and the splendour. In the world's struggle since then, he has borne, he trusts, no listless dreamer's part; but something, he thinks, passed from him with the passing of her presence from the earth; something within him fell silent when her voice fell into silence for ever.

In memory of Ersilia Zاراikine then he writes these words that follow.

CHAPTER I.

Introductory.

THE SNOWS that all the winter through fall silently behind a veil of whirling clouds and mist, or shine in clear sun-settings and sun-risings on the great Pyrenean peaks retreat swiftly before the lengthening days of early summer to the sunless hollows of the upper precipices, leaving below a world of streams, and forests, and pastures, where grass is springing, and trees are bursting into sudden leaf, and the long-frozen air is shaken with the noise of falling waters. There is the sound of water everywhere, from the trickle of the tiny fall that drips from rock to rock into basins fringed with purple flowers, to the dash of the cascade that leaps impetuously from some fissure in the wall of mountain cliff, or the roar of the torrent as it rushes over black boulders in the gorge below, churning its deep water into creamy foam tinged with tenderest green. The very snow-wreaths, dying without a murmur on the warm breast of the mountain-slopes, wake to a new and musical life in the little, low-voiced rills that wind amongst the long grass. There is rich store of flowers to be found in these upland pastures long after their brethren of the plain have passed away, and in yonder woods there is the dim blossom of the raspberry, and the fragrance of the small, wild-flavored strawberry. The mountain girls well know where to seek for the earliest of these amongst last year's fallen leaves; one may see them coming down the road with flying garments and square-folded capulets, bearing on their heads baskets of these scarlet spoils, or great bundles of firm, white, new-pressed curds, the mountain

cheese. In the upper gorges, where the ear is filled with the rush of the pent-in torrent, and the sunshine itself seems to borrow a shade of gloom from the early falling shadows, all day long may be heard the tinkling of bells as the long-haired shepherds lead their flocks and herds to those flowery, rill-watered *plateaux* far up the mountain-side. But in the lower valleys there is a sunny, peaceful stillness, for there the road has space to turn aside from the torrent's edge and winds downwards amongst trees and hedges, between fields bright with the vivid green of the broad-leaved maize, beneath steep, over-hanging meadows, where women are tossing and turning the early hay, filling the air with the delicious freshness of the new-mown grass.

I know those mountains well ; I know that glad awakening of a sweet idyllic life, that swift rush of vitality, of the bounteous growth, the large careless fertility of a mountain summer beneath southern skies. I know those soft green lawns hidden like kind surprises amidst the forests, and I know the forests themselves, where slender birch-trees rise from an undergrowth of box and bracken, and where, between moss-grown trunks one looks into another world of purple peaks rising above slow-shifting clouds ; whilst far below perhaps, shining in the mid-day sun, or peacefully reposing in the early shadow drawn by the protecting mountains, lies the little cluster of white houses that marks the site of some Pyrenean bath. All through the winter months these upper villages lie silent and deserted, shrouded in snow and mists, but with the returning summer they also awaken to a brief and joyous life ; a life by no means idyllic, yet not without a certain piquancy derived from the irrelevance of its details to the solemn scenes amidst which it is cast—like a trivial ornament traced by some fugitive hand at the feet of a serene colossal statue, which the first passing storm suffices to efface.

It was at one of these baths, at the little village of Eaux-Bonnes, that three or four of the people with whom we are most concerned in this history spent a few weeks

five-and-twenty years ago, in the midst of the noise and bustle, the water-drinking and bathing, the dancing and fiddling that go to make up that brief summer life of a mountain watering-place. An English gentleman alighting one evening from the top of a diligence at the door of one of the principal hotels, looked round, half-amused, half-dismayed on the varied, many-colored scene. He had come lumbering up that day from the stifling atmosphere of a half-deserted town in the plains below, and he found here a fresh mountain breeze, cool shadows, animation, life, movement everywhere. The sun had set, but the air was suffused with a soft radiance, and far overhead to the left a peak rose still glowing above the dark forests at its feet. Down below, hotel bells were ringing, whips were cracking, riding parties came clattering in; music was going on under the trees, and people who had been sitting there all the afternoon working, reading, smoking, or eating ices, still lingered, unwilling to exchange the coolness outside for the heated glare of the *table-d'hôte*.

"This is the Hôtel de —, I think," the gentleman said, giving his portmanteau to a waiter who stood lounging in the door-way. "Can I have a room here? I came to inquire for some one—whom I see coming across the Place at this moment," he added quickly.

Three people were coming towards him across the tree-planted Place, round two sides of which the little town was built. One of them was a woman, so fair that as she passed along, tall, slender and dressed in white, under the gloom of the rustling trees, more than one head was turned to look at her again. In her whole appearance there was something at once noble and simple; she walked with an erect poise of the head, and a perfectly natural ease and dignity; her brown hair was half-concealed by a straw hat; in one hand she held gathered together the folds of her dress, in the other a bunch of mountain flowers. At her side walked a pale, slight, black-haired, grey-eyed lad of nineteen or so, carrying a sketch book and paint box. A little behind

them, lingering to send sharp glances to the right and left amongst the groups of people, came a short, elderly lady dressed in black, whilst a mountain-boy, laden with cloaks and umbrellas, followed the party at no great distance.

That fairest woman was Ersilia, Princess Zaraikine. Her elderly companion was a distant connection and an old friend, Mademoiselle Mathilde de Brisac. The lad at her side was her cousin, one Humphrey Randolph, artist, enthusiast, student at Paris in the atelier of the well-known painter, Arthur Fleming—a genius who was to do great things and astonish the world some day, so at least one kind voice would say, whose accents, sweetest on earth to the lad, would often cheer and encourage him, despondent perhaps over his work. I know not how that may have been; a sorrow has fallen upon him since then, a tragedy that seemed for a time to blot the sun from his heavens, and leave him groping in an outer darkness lies between him and those days, vivid with golden light, radiant with a tender beauty. He it is who writes these lines, looking back upon his youth across that separating gulph of darkness and sorrow and despair.

These two in front then, who had been spending the summer's day in the forests far up the mountain-side, walked on together, followed by Mademoiselle de Brisac, who had joined them as they entered the Place. Randolph was talking as they came along. He was generally held, I believe, to be a somewhat silent and moody lad; a good deal of diffidence, and a great capacity for being bored made it always easier for him to be silent than to talk in society; only when with the Princess Zaraikine words came to him readily, and speech seemed better than silence. And yet why should I say so? With her, talking was sweet, but it was sweet also to be silent, and it was her presence that made the sweetness and the joy.

“Of course, I want to see Rome more than any other place in the world,” he was saying to her now, as they walked on together, “and I mean to go there and all

over Italy some day ; but I suppose I care less about it now than I should otherwise do, because I could not leave Mr. Fleming. If you knew him—and if he comes here you will know him—you would understand my feeling.”

“I do understand, Humphrey,” she answered. Her voice was clear, full, and harmonious, with a melancholy tone now and then. Her eyes, too, which were grey and of great depth and purity of color, had, when her face was in repose, an expression of melancholy and of the reserve that seems to hold hidden depths of thought ; but as she spoke and looked at the lad, they brightened with a sweet and frank kindness. “I quite understand,” she said, “that you would not like to leave Mr. Fleming, and you will not care less for Italy because you put off going there for a year or two. I sometimes feel sorry to have known Rome ever since I was a little girl of ten year old ; I should like to have read and thought a great deal more about it before going there for the first time. I think there is a first love that one has for places before seeing them, that one always regrets losing even through a knowledge of the reality.”

“It is a love that I have all my life had for Rome,” Humphrey answered, “my mother was always talking to me about the year she spent there. I believe it became a sort of beatific vision that kept her alive through all her after-years of bread-making and butter-making. And then I was born in Rome, you know ; I spent the first six months of my life there, and I can hardly believe that I have no remembrance at all of that time. One has all sorts of vague beautiful memories that one cannot date ; and I always like to think that some of mine belong to Rome.”

“If your memories of Rome are beautiful, they are very different from mine, Mr. Humphrey,” said Made-moiselle de Brisac, suddenly joining in the conversation, “for five years I endured that city of dirt, and fleas, and beggars, and please Heaven I will never set foot in it again. The dulness alone is enough to kill one, at any

rate in the house of my excellent brother-in-law, who, if I may say so of him now, poor man, had a perfect genius for dulness. I adore pictures and statues like everyone else, but one does not care to spend one's entire life in a posture of adoration—that is easily understood."

"Is that your experience of Rome, Mademoiselle?" said Humphrey. "I imagined it to be a place where people can amuse themselves just as they please."

"Not at all," said Mademoiselle Mathilde, "the English have spoilt it, as they spoil every place they go to. They raise the prices by their extravagant amusements which amuse nobody, and render a refined and rational society—society in the real sense of the word—impossible."

"*Merci du compliment, Mademoiselle,*" said Humphrey, unable to help laughing at these original remarks.

"You may laugh, Mr. Humphrey, but what I say is perfectly true. At my brother-in-law's receptions, for instance, the English used to swarm, and the result was that anything like a sustained or well-conducted conversation was out of the question. In Paris, next winter, where I shall have a salon of my own, and where I hope to revive some of the old traditions of good society—you will see that things will be very different. I will have no men crowding together to talk in corners, or flirting with the silliest girls in the room, while the rest of the women yawn apart. I declare to you that I never see one of your great Englishmen, with a sad face and a long beard, come lounging along without beginning to yawn myself—I see one approaching us at this moment, and I already begin to feel sleepy. Is it anyone you know, Mr. Humphrey? He seems to be coming straight towards us."

Humphrey looked up, and saw, indeed, before him a familiar form—a tall, thin, broad-shouldered man, with a slight stoop and loose-hanging clothes, coming towards them, with long steps and a bent head.

"It is Mr. Fleming," said the lad, springing forward

gladly. "When did you arrive, Sir?" he said, as his master's hand met his with a kind grasp, "I did not expect you so soon."

"I have only just arrived," Mr. Fleming said. "I have left my portmanteau at your hotel, Humphrey, and was inquiring for you, when I saw you coming across the Place."

"I have been up the mountains with the Princess Zاراикіne," Humphrey answered. He turned, and went back a few steps to his companion. "This is Mr. Fleming," he said, with an abrupt boyish eagerness.

She held out her hand quite simply and frankly, "I am very glad to see you, Mr. Fleming," she said. "My cousin Humphrey has been looking forward every day to your arrival."

He took the hand she gave him, he looked at the fair face before him—it is a moment that Randolph sees still through the twilight of the intervening years in which a hundred trivial details fade, and leave these two standing alone against the tranquil background of evening mountains rising clear against the evening sky. The next moment Mademoiselle Mathilde came hurrying up with a curtsy, as she was presented to Mr. Fleming. The music had ceased by this time, and the people were streaming by in the swift-falling dusk.

"Is nobody going in?" said Mademoiselle Mathilde, "our dinner must certainly be ready by this time, Ersilia, and I am starving. I have had nothing to eat since the morning but a little cream-cake. I am not like you English who lunch upon hot chicken and cold pudding at one o'clock—"

Humphrey and his master stood watching the two figures as they walked side by side, towards the hotel, and they also began to move more slowly in the same direction.

"I have missed you, Humphrey," Mr. Fleming said, putting his hand affectionately on the lad's shoulder, as they walked on together. "I have been ill, and I have had no one to make my coffee as I like it. I have had

visitors, and no one to take them round my studio, and tell them how fine all my pictures are."

"Have you been ill, Sir?" said Humphrey. "Why did you not let me know? I would have come to you at once."

"All the way to Paris? Well, I believe you would Humphrey; but you see I was not so bad as all that. It was only the heat that knocked me up at last; Paris was like a white furnace by day, and a heated oven by night. I used to lie awake and dream of streams and green fields that I could never reach; but at last there came a day's rain, and I was all right again. And how are you, my boy? You look better than when you left Paris."

"I never was better in my life," said Humphrey. "Tell me what visitors you had, Sir. I should not have thought there was a soul left in Paris."

"That is exactly what Mrs. Grey said, when she came to see me the other day. 'Dear me, Mr. Fleming,' she cried, 'who would have thought of finding you here still? I came by the merest chance, in the merest hope of seeing you. I thought there was not a soul left in Paris. Who could have expected to find you?' 'And why not, Madam,' I replied, 'since you also are here?' 'Oh, but I am not here,' she said; 'that is, I arrived only yesterday from Brussels, and I leave again next week for the Pyrenees.' You don't know Mrs. Grey, Humphrey, but she is an old acquaintance of mine; and of all pseudo-fine ladies she is the most intolerable. You would have enjoyed taking her round the studio; she went into ecstasies over everything, and when she came to your picture which was standing in one corner—the one, you know, into which you have put that fine flaming sunset, and which we agreed was not the finest work of art the world has yet seen—well, when she came to that, she fairly went down on her knees on the floor before it. 'Oh, Mr. Fleming,' she cried, 'what genius! what sentiment! what a beautiful mind you must have! such poetry, you know—it thrills one!' 'That is not mine, Madam,' I said, 'it was painted by my pupil, a very promising lad

of nineteen.' She got up off her knees in a great hurry. 'Indeed!' she said. 'Yes now I look at it again, it is fine—very fine—but it is not *the* master touch. Still it is promising, as you say—very promising. Charlotte, my dear, come and look at this picture painted by a young man only nineteen. Ah, there is something I must look at! *This* is yours, Mr. Fleming!' and so on."

"And who is Charlotte?" asked Humphrey, greatly amused by this recital.

"Charlotte is a niece that Mrs. Grey brought with her; a pretty little gentle girl, not at all like her aunt. You would like to know her opinion of your picture, Humphrey, but I cannot give it you, for she looked scared out of her wits, and did not speak a word. You can ask her yourself, when you see her, for Mrs. Grey told me she was coming here in a few days, and I know that nothing will prevent her finding me out. I shall hand her over to you, Humphrey. I shall present you to her as the promising young man of genius whose picture she admired so much. She is full of soul, and will just suit a sentimental young fellow like you."

"I would rather have the niece who says nothing, Sir," the lad answered, laughing. They had reached the door of the hotel by this time; but before they entered, Humphrey turned and grasped his master's hand again, for very gladness at seeing him once more. He seems still to see that kind, sad, tired face, with the golden, grizzled beard and moustaches, the thin brown hair that fell over his forehead, and had to be pushed off again and again, with a familiar gesture; a face worn with lines of care and thought—the face of a man looking older than his years, but which for those who loved him and whom he loved, had in it I know not what of sweetness and kindness, of tender, genial humour. Randolph had neither father nor brother, and in all the world he loved no man so well as his master, Arthur Fleming.

CHAPTER II.

Family History.

WHEN the present writer was quite a little boy—not much more than nine years old—his mother called him one April morning away from the river side, where he was playing by himself. “Humphrey,” she said, “I have just had a letter from your uncle ; you are to go and stay with him for a few days at his house in Kensington, and you must get ready at once, for the coach will pass in an hour,” and then, whilst she went about the preparations for his journey, she gave the boy more than one exhortation to which he listened with mingled exultation and awe, for he had never seen his uncle, nor within his own recollection had he ever before been from home.

This home, in which he had thus spent all his earliest years, was a large farm in ——shire, and the remembrance of it makes Randolph’s childhood—that dim, enchanted borderland, lying between the unknown whence we came, and the years in which we learn to live a conscious life—it makes his childhood, I say, appear to him like some sweet, abiding pastoral background to all the shifting scenes that followed. It was a pleasant, open, fertile country in which he lived, where the sky dipped on every side to meet the level horizon, and there was little save trees and haystacks to break the view of earth and heaven. Red sunsets burned low behind the low black hedges, flat meadows stretched down to the stream which, bordered here and there by trees and bushes, flowed

clear and shallow amongst them—meadows golden with buttercups in spring, sweet with flowering grasses in summer, where Humphrey's guilty flying feet left a long, shining track, as he sped across to reach his favorite haunts by the river. He would be content to lie for hours on those grassy banks in the long spring and summer days. He was a somewhat weakly, ailing child, with small strength or taste for rough boyish sports ; but like many lonely children he had learned to be happy enough by himself, and had a passionate love for the flowers and grasses, the humming, buzzing, creeping world around him. It was a sort of regret to him to find, on re-visiting these childish haunts after his first school days, that he had grown so tall as to quite over-top those early play-fellows, and that his eyes were now so far above the level of the ox-eye daisies, the tall rushes, the crimson flowering spikes of the water-plants. He had grown beyond them as he had grown beyond the time when each new budding thing was still a sweet surprise, and when the further bend of the river—beyond which he never went—suggested a wider range of possibilities than the whole world affords now, and made the yearning belief in some vague sunset land where one might wander onwards for ever without penetrating to a familiar other side, seem one not wholly vain.

Beyond the meadows and the apple orchards, the corn-ricks and the haystacks, stood the substantial farm where Humphrey lived. He remembers well the ample kitchen stretching from back to front of the house, the wide dairy, the shining best parlor, where relics of a past that had a mysterious charm for little Humphrey, stood amongst the old-fashioned furniture. Sketches of Rome and Florence, a small martyred St. Cecilia in white marble, a Roman lamp, an ivory model of the leaning tower of Pisa, these and other mementoes of an Italian tour, such as people used to bring back in old times, created a romance for the child in the midst of the homely farm life that no succeeding years could efface. He remembers, too, the adjoining room into

which he used to peep, and fly, and peep again, fascinated by the sight of a white-haired old grandfather, sitting stiff and rheumatic among his money-bags and account-books, with a big knotted stick at his side, which he could shake with emphasis at any rash intruder who popped an uncalled-for head in at the door ; and he remembers the little brown bedroom above, with the window that a wide-spreading cherry tree seemed to fill with white blossoms and red and white fruit all the year round, and the bed with the blue-checked counterpane, where Humphrey, in the early dawn, would lie listening with a happy heart to the sounds of awakening life, cocks crowing, birds twittering, farm-laborers passing to and fro, talking with gruff echoing voices in the morning air, till the boy could lie and listen no longer, but, slipping on his clothes, would run out to take his part in that fresh stir, whilst the grass was still grey with dew, and the old farm buildings golden in the sun's level rays.

In and about these scenes of varied life, now feeding the poultry, now inspecting the pigs and the cows, now picking up fallen apples in the orchard, and anon helping Betty with the butter-making or taking a turn with Molly at the bread-making, there moved a woman, who, in those early days, had still the freshness of youth, but who, as Humphrey best remembers her, had a thin, pale, careworn face, with auburn hair already mixed with grey, smoothed back under her plain cap. My mother, I think, can never have been beautiful, but her quick, brown eyes were full of sympathy and intelligence, and her face lives in her son's memory with the idealized charm that belongs to a countenance we have learned to interpret by the underlying character that has moulded it. She had the calmest judgment, the clearest common sense, the most perfect faculty for discerning and adapting means to an end of any woman I ever knew—all crossed and frustrated at times by sudden tender impulses that made the loveable weaknesses of an admirable nature. I seem to see her yet as she moved about

kitchen, and farm-yard, and dairy, often with her little lad clinging to her skirts, giving her orders with a prompt decision, a thorough knowledge of details that forbade dispute or hesitation in obeying them.

Something of the story of her early years, of how my father first met her, wooed and married her, Humphrey heard when he was a lad. But it was at a time when he was still young enough for the stories of a former generation to have about them an unreal sentiment of faded romance, and in after-years, when he would willingly have learnt more, all the principal actors were dead. Such of the facts, however, as were patent to everybody he knew well enough, and he cannot remember the time when he was not familiar with what, to his childish imagination, seemed some far-off legend of a rich great-uncle who was a grand gentleman with a fine house in London, and whom Humphrey was to go and see one day when he should be big enough.

My father was eight-and-twenty when he married, old enough one would think to know his own mind and take his own way in life. Nevertheless, belonging as he did to an old and wealthy county family, it was not perhaps astonishing, as the world goes, that his marriage with a woman however admirable, in a rank of life so much beneath his own, should have given great offence to his own people, and to no one more than to his uncle, Mr. Randolph, who, himself without a son, had adopted this orphan child of a younger brother. The Randolph estates were unentailed, but they had always hitherto gone in the male line, and Mr. Randolph, their present possessor, had early made up his mind to satisfy at once his family pride and his fatherly affection by marrying his nephew to his only daughter Margaret. Three years before my father's marriage, an end had been put to this plan for the time by Margaret Randolph's falling in love with and marrying the Comte de Florian, a French gentleman of great wealth. The marriage was one too unexceptionable in every way for Mr. Randolph to refuse his consent to it ; but when, two years later, Monsieur

de Florian died, and his young widow with her little daughter Ersilia returned to live in her father's house in Kensington, those old schemes and hopes revived perhaps, to be once more frustrated by his nephew's marriage with a farmer's daughter.

Mr. Randolph refused to recognize the marriage, or to see his nephew again, and my father took his wife first to Paris, and then to Rome for the winter. It was not the first time that the nephew and uncle's schemes of life had clashed. Both came of a family in which political life was a strong tradition. Mr. Randolph himself, like his father and grandfather before him, had entered Parliament when quite a young man, and had probably very early set his heart on seeing his nephew follow in the same well-worn tracks. But that nephew presented the oft repeated, but always perplexing phenomenon of an individuality that will assert itself in defiance of the best ascertained precedents. With him a new spirit entered the old Randolph family. He grew up a refined, amiable, unpractical lad, with a turn ~~but~~ for painting, but for nothing else, and a certain sensitiveness of temperament that made him shrink from the publicity of a parliamentary life. Mr. Randolph did his best with this hard problem with which fate had provided him—that is to say, he ignored it as much as possible, as men will ignore problems that are quite beyond the range of their sympathies and experience. He gave his nephew what in after-years, in contradistinction to that nephew's tastes perhaps, he emphatically termed the education of a gentleman. He sent him to Eton and to college, and then abroad for a year or two, which the lad spent in Italy studying as best he could, the art he loved, in which he then and afterwards attained to some proficiency. But on his return to England his uncle forbade these favorite studies; and presently, on a dissolution of Parliament, the young man, at Mr. Randolph's urgent desire, went down to stand as candidate for a small borough where the Randolphs had some local interest.

He lost his election, to his own great relief; but

when, on his return to London, Mr. Randolph, with no small irritation, asked him what the devil he meant to do with himself now, the question remained without an answer. He was in a great measure dependent on his uncle, and he passed the next few years, I imagine, in the somewhat purposeless way that results from a compromise between two conflicting sets of beliefs, in a mind wanting in the courage necessary for decided action. My father was an artist by nature and by choice, but he was probably not uninfluenced by his uncle's old-fashioned creed—I write of fifty years since—that it was in the buying, not in the painting of pictures that the love of art should be shown by a gentleman. It was only after his marriage, when an independent course of action was forced upon him, and when, as I cannot but think, my mother's straightforward influence was brought to bear, that he applied himself in earnest to painting—with what chances of ultimate success cannot now be calculated, for he died at the end of that winter in Rome, hardly eighteen months after his marriage, and when his little son was but four months old.

This history, which he has thus given in brief outline, Humphrey heard in early life. Of his father, he had of course no personal knowledge; but his mother never wearied of talking of him, and one who knew and loved him well—my master—Arthur Fleming—often spoke of him as having been a man of a most sweet, generous, and open temper, with an extraordinary power of attracting and attaching to himself friends; a man of refined, æsthetic tastes, but as one may judge with no great originality of genius, and lacking the concentrated purpose and depths of mind necessary for a great artist, or for achieving greatness, perhaps, in any form.

After my father's death, a sort of reconciliation took place between my mother and her husband's family, partly brought about, I believe, by Madame de Florian, who still lived in her old home, devoted to the memory of her husband, and to her little daughter Ersilia. Mr. Randolph went down into the country to see my mother

who, with her infant son, had returned to her father's house. She received him with the calmness and dignity of a naturally refined and simple-minded woman; and my uncle, who was a man of the world, at once recognized these qualities in her, and though there was never much intercourse between them, he ever afterwards spoke with a perfect respect of his nephew's wife.

It was at that time that an arrangement was made by which little Humphrey was to remain with his mother till he should be nine years old, and then be sent to some school by his uncle, spending his holidays partly at Kensington, partly with his mother. It was by her own choice that my mother remained henceforth in her own home.

"If your father had lived," she said one day to her son, years afterwards, "I should have been a different woman, I dare say. I was learning to enter into his thoughts and tastes, and he should never have had reason to be ashamed of his wife. But after his death it was different. I had to choose between struggling on amongst his fine relations, with no one to give me a helping hand, perhaps, or of coming back to your grandfather who missed me sorely, and to the work I had been used to all my life. I chose the last, as your education was provided for, my boy, and I think I did rightly, though I had to give up something I had got to care for."

"I think if I had been in the way of it when I was a child, I might have learnt as well as anyone, Humphrey," she said, on another occasion, "but it was late to begin even when I married, and now—why, it would fidget your grandfather to death to see me with a book in my hand," she said with a smile, "and it would fidget me, too, to think that meanwhile everything was going at sixes and sevens, maybe. Besides, I feel drawn somehow towards the housework, and the dairy, and the animals. So you must just put up with an ignorant old mother, my lad."

"Neither old or ignorant, but the best and dearest of mothers," Humphrey said, stooping down and kissing her, "and I hate to see women always reading."

She looked up in his face with her kind, tender eyes. "Eh, my lad," she said, "there are fine things in books, and I should like well enough to know some of them. Your father used to read to me often, and I remember that when I was a girl, before I ever saw him, I thought there was nothing in the world like a story. I was glad enough in those days to get a chance of running away from the house-work, and hiding myself with a book. I found a number of them in a cupboard upstairs the other day; they belonged to your grandmother, but they seemed to me poor stuff when I looked into them again. I liked what your father read better, poetry and history, and such things."

So she would sometimes talk, and the lot, that to a commoner mind, might have appeared insupportable by contrast with the more ideal one that had once been hers, she accepted with a perfect simplicity, too calm and unwavering to be termed resignation. As for her son, he cannot be sufficiently grateful for the wisdom which, satisfied that his future was secure, at once laid aside all paltry ambitions, and allowed him to spend his first years in the large freedom of the bounteous country life.

Mr. Randolph never came again after that first visit, nor took any further notice of his little kinsman, till that April morning when, as I have said, his letter called Humphrey away from the river-side to prepare for his journey to Kensington. But the boy's mother, who was anxious that her son should know as much as possible of his father's relations, often spoke of them to him, and of the time when he should be old enough to go and see them. Humphrey liked nothing better than these stories; in his imagination, this far-off uncle, who was a gentleman, as his own father had been, formed the happiest contrast to a present crabbed old grandfather, who, as he knew well enough (though not through his mother), was no gentleman; and the thought of this unknown uncle filled the boy's mind with a vague expectation and hope, as he made his first venture into the world on the top of a London coach.

An old red brick house with a tall iron railing and paved court in front, a lovely old-fashioned garden overshadowed by fruit-trees behind, a stately muffled drawing-room which no one ever used, a pleasant oak-furnished library full of books and scattered papers, where an energetic, imperious little man, with ambition working in his brain, and a life's disappointment, perhaps, in his heart, sat reading, writing, dictating letters—in after-years all these things were so familiar to Humphrey that he can hardly now separate his later memories from those first impressions he received when, a half-frightened, half-expectant little lad, he was set down at his uncle's door that April day. Perhaps to his inexperienced eyes, the difference between the old grandfather at home, and the little man with bristling white hair who looked him all over with a keen eye, and dismissed him with a nod, was hardly sufficient in degree to justify the wide space that his imagination had placed between them. Perhaps he was glad to be sent with such curt welcome from a presence that filled him with awe and disappointment—these things are but dim memories to him now. But he well remembers, as one of those keen childish experiences that never fade from the mind, the sudden sense of desertion and loneliness with which he found himself left in a strange room to spend, as he thought, a long afternoon by himself.

It was a much used, faded room, with long windows that opened on to the garden; but a storm of rain was falling and he could not go out. A good-natured housemaid, pitying the little stray lad who stood staring with round eyes and an uncertain heart, took some pains to ascertain his tastes and to satisfy them as far as she could. She gave him some books, a pencil and paper, an old paint-box, and then left him. Humphrey was a child of resources, and did not mind being alone; but he was only a child, and he had never before been away from his home and his mother. He would not cry—he would have thought that undignified—but he felt very miserable, and I dare say there never was a more forlorn-

looking little stranger than this one, who sat winking away his tears over his paper and pencil, when some one came running quickly in through the window from the garden, where a sudden gleam of sunshine was turning the lessening shower into a golden mist. It was a slim little maiden of twelve years, in a dim sea-blue frock and amber necklace, with loose brown hair falling upon her neck and shoulders, and in her skirt, which she held gathered up in front, a great heap of wet apple-blossoms, which all tumbled on the floor as she saw Humphrey.

She came straight up to the boy, who had jumped off his chair as she came in, and now stood rubbing his eyes with the back of his hand that she might not see his tears.

"Are you Humphrey?" she said; "have you been here long? I was in the summer house at the end of the garden, and nobody told me you had come. Do you know who I am? I am your cousin, Ersilia de Florian."

Humphrey had heard before of his cousin Ersilia. His mother, some time after that reconciliation, of which mention has been made, had gone, for the only time in her life, to stay for a few days at Mr. Randolph's house in Kensington; and she had often related to Humphrey how, on the first morning after her arrival (she feeling lonely enough, as he can guess now, in that great house with her half unfriendly kindred) a knock had come at her bedroom door, and opening it, she had seen standing there a little round-cheeked, grey-eyed maiden of four years old, who put her soft little hand into my mother's with an air of tender patronage, and invited her down to the breakfast-room. Mamma was in bed with a bad headache, this kind little hostess said, but grandpapa would be down soon; and now, how should they amuse themselves? She brought out her doll; she proposed one game after another to wile away the time; she set to work in earnest to entertain her guest, and succeeded at any rate in winning her heart. This had been one of Humphrey's favorite stories, for which he would ask again and again, and the little cousin with a strange for-

eign name had, doubtless, had her share in that vague wonder and expectation which, as I have said, had hung about this unknown world in which he now found himself.

Humphrey, however, had been discovering for the last half hour that life is full of illusions, and that there is much vanity in a world that one has peopled with expectations ; nor am I certain that Ersilia, for the first few minutes, did much to relieve this sad sense of general discouragement. Humphrey did not think her very pretty. There was a little girl with whom he sometimes played at home, who had hitherto been his ideal of feminine beauty. She had a round, rosy face, and tight, shining, golden curls, and he thought that on the whole he preferred these to Ersilia's pale cheeks, and rough, brown hair that waved in short lengths at the top of her head, and fell in loose curls on her shoulders. But he liked his new companion's clear, grey eyes, her long, black, curved eyelashes, and he presently found himself speculating as to how those eyelashes would suit the greenish-blue eyes and pink and white face of his little friend at home. But these speculations did not last long, for before the day was over he had forgotten all about his old friend—with whom, indeed, he had had more than one quarrel, and whom he had found more lovely than amiable—and thought that in all the world there was no one so dear and so beautiful as his cousin Ersilia.

The two children were friends directly. She was three years older than Humphrey, but scarcely less of a child, I fancy, than he was, though she had already that instinct of womanly thoughtfulness and tenderness, which, as we know, some women have from their cradles, whilst with others it is as a lost sense to the end of their lives. I think she saw Humphrey's tears, though the boy tried hard to hide them, and she set herself at once to cheer and amuse him ; as once, years before, she had, all unprompted, devoted herself to the amusement of his mother.

“Do you like apple-blossom?” she said, picking

up her boughs from the floor ; " I am going to put these into water. If it were not so wet we would go into the garden and get some more."

She began putting them into a jar, whilst Humphrey watched her with wonder.

" Do you pick apple-blossom ? " he said at length. " I am never allowed to do that. We keep it for the apples in autumn."

Ersilia laughed. " I never thought about apples," she said. " But I suppose we don't care much about them here, for when they are ripe they all lie about on the grass where they fall. How nicely you draw," she added, coming up to where Humphrey sat at the table, and kneeling down at his side. " Can you paint, too ? "

" Yes," said Humphrey, " I can paint very nicely." And indeed he thought he could. " I will paint your portrait if you like."

" Will you ? " said Ersilia, somewhat impressed, perhaps, by the confident sense of power expressed in this prompt offer. " I should like that very much."

And Humphrey, who in fact used his pencil with more skill than is usual with children of nine years old, drew and painted what he was pleased to call a portrait of his cousin, in which the blue frock and amber necklace had a prominent place, one may be sure. Only the other day he came across this childish daub, which he gave to his mother when he went home, and which she carefully pasted, along with others of his early productions, at the end of one of his father's old sketch-books. Great heaven ! with what a sudden, tender pang, the memory of that vanished day came back to him as he gazed. The meaningless lines, the crude colors faded away ; he seemed to see again in dim half-forgotten lines the sweet childish face, the falling hair, the innocent eyes ; he seemed to hear the fitful rain splashing upon the gravel walk, to see a little lad bending, all absorbed, over his work.

Mr. Randolph dined out, but Ersilia and Humphrey had tea together in that pleasant room looking out upon

the old garden, where the birds were twittering, and the sun shone in golden gleams between the sudden storms of rain : and as Ersilia poured out the tea, and handed the bread and butter, she asked her cousin a hundred questions about his mother and about his life on the old farm at home, imparting to him, in return for the details he gave her, some of her own history.

Madame de Florian had died, as Humphrey already knew, more than two years before. Nor did Ersilia once mention her mother, whose memory, I know, she cherished as a sacred thing apart till the end of her life. But she told Humphrey something of her history during these last two years, which she had spent partly with her grandfather at Kensington, and partly with her father's brother, Monsieur de Florian, who had large estates in the north of France, to which she had been more than once, but who lived chiefly in Paris or in Rome.

Her uncle was an old man, Ersilia said ; he had no children, and his wife had died a long time ago, but his sister-in-law, Mademoiselle de Brisac, occupied an apartment in his hotel in Paris.

"She is old, too," Ersilia added ; "at least I think so. But her hair is not white like my uncle's ; it is quite black, in tight little curls, and her cheeks are as red—as red as if they were painted."

"Perhaps they are," Humphrey suggested quite innocently.

"Oh, no !" said Ersilia, with some indignation ; "she would never think of doing such a thing. Why, it is very wrong, you know to paint. She is very good-natured and kind to me ; she says she will introduce me into society some day when I come out of the convent. Did you know that I am going away to-morrow to a convent in Paris ? My uncle de Florian says that to be *bien élevé*, one should go to school in a convent ; and so grandpapa says that I can go too, as there is no one here to teach me. I am glad of that ; I want to learn a great deal and know about everything. I have had two gov-

ernesses, but grandpapa did not like them, so they went away again."

So they talked to each other, whilst the daylight faded and the fire seemed to brighten in the grey twilight, filling the room with fantastic lights and shadows, such as children love. Presently Ersilia went to the piano and played a little stumbling tune in the dusk, that Humphrey, who was quite tired of sitting still, might jump up and down to the queer little shadows that jumped back to him on the opposite wall. Then, coming back to the fire, the two children sat down together on the rug in front of it, and told each other stories, in which Humphrey, for his part, inspired by the moment, slew more than one dragon whilst engaged in rescuing the beautiful princesses whom he always named Ersilia.

What dragons, indeed, had already crossed the path of the little lonely girl, I wonder? I think she cannot have led a very happy life after her mother's death, alone with her governesses and her grandfather, who, as Humphrey well knew in after years, was apt to be like a whirlwind tearing and storming through the house. Servants, children, all went flying at the prompt bidding of the fierce little man, who was a regular tyrant in his own household. That very afternoon he had called Ersilia away from the portrait sitting, and she had come back very pale and silent for a minute or two, though she soon began to laugh and talk as before, and said nothing of what had passed between herself and her grandfather. I have sometimes thought that the years of childhood are, as it were, a prophecy of all our after-life, the little stage on which with puny passions, we all unconsciously rehearse the scenes that are to make the joys and tragedies of the years to come. I know not how that may be; but I do know that it was not in vain that to Ersilia, child and woman, was given the bravest and most silent-enduring heart I ever knew.

Humphrey, tired out by his journey and his day's excitement, fell asleep in the midst of one of his stories, and only woke to find himself being carried off to bed

by the friendly housemaid. But when Ersilia, half an hour later, came, as she had promised, to wish him good-night, she found in the dim white twilight with which an uncertain moon filled the room, a little figure, wide-awake, sitting up in bed in his night-shirt. The little lad was full of woe again. He was used to say his prayers to his mother every night, and the ceremony was too intimately connected in his mind with repeating them aloud at her knee for him to go through it alone, but he was oppressed by a horrible sense of guilt in leaving it undone.

"I want my mother," the boy cried, with a choking sob that he could not keep down.

"I will hear your prayers," Ersilia said, on learning this cause of grief. I do not know what thoughts passed through the mind of the little motherless girl, whose mother would always be wanting to her now, but she sat down on the bed, and taking Humphrey's two hands into hers, put her arm round him as he knelt beside her. He laid his head on her shoulder and so repeated his evening prayer. He remembers yet the soft pressure of the little hand that clasped his own, the earnest eyes that looked down into his in the dim light, the clear childish voice that helped his faltering words.

After she had tucked him into bed again, and given him his good-night kiss, she turned back as she was leaving the room and gave him one kiss more. "I wish you were my little brother, Humphrey," she said, wistfully. "I should like to have a little brother like you to love me always."

The next day she went away to her Paris convent, and it seemed to Humphrey that a sudden loneliness and darkness fell upon the great house, so that he was glad to get home again to his mother.

He never forgot his cousin Ersilia, though he saw her no more in the years that followed. But he often thought of that fair little playmate of one April day, and no succeeding impressions came to confuse the distinctness of that first memory. Four years later, he being then a Rugby school-boy, a somewhat dreamy, uncongenial lad,

I take it, he heard that his cousin was married to Prince Zaraikine, a Russian nobleman of rank, many years older than herself. After that, a sort of mystery fell upon her life. The marriage had not been a happy one, he was told in vague phrases ; she was living with her uncle at Rome ; little was known of her husband. It was not till five or six years later, when Humphrey was studying painting in Paris, that he heard something more definite of her story—that her husband had deserted her within six months of her marriage, that later on he had become involved in some Polish conspiracy, had been killed the previous year in attempting to escape from Russia, and that the Princess Zaraikine, famed for her beauty, her talents, her accomplishments, was still living at Rome with her uncle, Monsieur de Florian, and his sister-in-law Mademoiselle Mathilde de Brisac.

CHAPTER III.

Digressive.

THERE exists, as I have already intimated, a half-finished portrait of the Princess Zaraikine. It was painted in the last months of the year that we were at the Eaux-Bonnes, but only the head is finished, the remainder being merely sketched in; the hand that began it was arrested half-way in its progress, but it is the master-piece of him who wrought it, and I think the very vagueness of the accessories give more life and vigor to the clear and perfect face that looks out from a shadowy background.

There are certain portraits which, as we look at them, suggest even more than they express, in which the one unvarying expression on the canvas is but the key, as it were, to a world of varying emotions, in which a whole living soul seems still to look forth from eyes pathetic with memories that are secrets for ever now. Just so, we say, that man must have loved and hated, fought and conquered; just so, that woman must have smiled and wept, and scorned, and met her lover's eyes. Something of all this he feels who, looking now at the portrait of the Princess Zaraikine, sees her again in the glow of her youth and beauty. He sees a face of purest outline and coloring, instinct with life, with sentiment, with imagination, overshadowed by something of dim wonder, of doubtful questioning in the line of the brow, in the curve of the parting lips, yet with a smile on these and in her

eyes that belonged to that year of her life alone. Those eyes could brighten with sudden anger, could weep tears of compassion or love, but never tears of weakness and feeble self-pity; and yet there was in them at times I know not what expression of wistful appeal, as of a child who suffers pain and bears it bravely, yet wonders why it should have been so hurt. It was an expression that Ersilia must have gained, I think, in early youth, and that never quite left her in all the years that came after.

What strange trouble indeed, what to her quite incomprehensible pain must not that have been that she endured in the first years of her girlhood? To Humphrey she never spoke of that early time, but something he heard of it from others and something he can imagine from what he himself knew of her character. She was but a child when she married, a child of sixteen, with features that had that greatest charm of early youth, a sweet promise for after years, but with little positive beauty, I have been told, beyond her abundant hair and lovely eyes. I can fancy with what confiding innocence, with what guileless simplicity those eyes must have looked out on the new world opening before her, with what childlike reverence for everything wiser, and older, and nobler than herself she must have laid her hand in her husband's—something too, one can imagine of the rude shock she must have felt, when not six months later she found herself deserted, alone in the world, left to her fate in a foreign city.

“My married life seems to me like a dream,” she once said, not to Randolph, but to another, “like one of those dreams that haunt one throughout the day, and color everything with their own sentiment—only mine has haunted all the succeeding years of my life. As I look back upon my husband now, I see that he must have been a man of great and varied talents; he had travelled a great deal, he spoke many languages with a Russian’s fluency, he had read everything, and seemed to know almost as much as he had read. I can judge him apart from myself in these days, and knowing something of the

world, his conduct appears to me less bewildering than it did at the time, when I could only judge with a girl's inexperience of the proportions of life. I can now imagine him to have been urged, by motives which could not have occurred to me then, into a marriage repugnant to him with a little girl whom he abandoned without remorse when he found her in his way. To me in those days he appeared transcendently clever and noble, and, if he would have let me, I should have learned to love him. In his eyes I can only have appeared a child without beauty or talents, too shy almost to speak to a man whom she held in so much reverence."

Ersilia, then, this poor, shy, guileless little one, found herself abandoned suddenly in a strange, foreign city, where she spent some days of, who shall say what hopeless bewilderment, before her uncle, to whom she at once appealed in her distress, could come to fetch her to his own home. In the days when Randolph used to question Mademoiselle Mathilde upon every detail she could remember of his cousin Ersilia's life, she related to him more than once, and very graphically, the history of the journey to Vienna which she made in the company of Monsieur de Florian when he went to fetch his niece.

Her brother-in-law insisted on her accompanying him, she said, though she had no liking for such long journeys. They travelled day and night till they reached Vienna, and she remembered their arrival there as if it had been yesterday. Ersilia was staying at a big hotel, and Monsieur de Florian and his sister were shown up into a large gloomy salon, with black furniture and a deep old-fashioned window, looking out upon a damp garden full of trees, all dripping with the rain of a pouring day—she remembered it all perfectly, Mademoiselle Mathilde said, it looked so gloomy and *triste* for a young thing like that; even she, who was old, liked bright colors and sunshine. There was a door open into a bed-room where the Princess Zaraikine's maid was packing her mistress's trunks, but in the salon there was no one but the poor little Princess herself, who was sitting

all alone and forlorn on the window-seat, with an open book on her lap, and the wind driving the wet branches of the trees in at the open window, and blowing about her loose hair falling on her shoulders, as she still wore it in those days. She jumped up, however, at the sound of footsteps and voices, and came running to embrace her uncle. He began to cry a little ("he had a soft heart, my brother-in-law, and could cry a little for anything," Mademoiselle Mathilde said *en parenthèse*), but Ersilia did not cry at all. She took hold of his two hands and kissed him, and then, still holding his hands, turned and embraced Mademoiselle Mathilde also. She was very pale, and had a sort of bewildered look in her eyes, but she was quite calm.

"I would have come to you, and saved you the journey uncle," she said, "I had written to tell you so, but then I found that I—I had not money enough; and then your letter came, and I knew you would have already started."

"The damned scoundrel!" cried Monsieur de Florian. He dropped Ersilia's hands, and began walking up and down the room; she stood still by the table, her hands resting on it. Presently she said,

"Have you heard from Prince Zاراikine, uncle? Do you know why he left me? Had I done anything wrong, or vexed him in any way?"

"He left you because he is a black-hearted villain," cried Monsieur de Florian; "but you shall never see him again, Ersilia, you shall come and live with me, my child."

She did not answer for a minute, but went to the window again and stood leaning against it, looking out. At last she turned round, and going up to her uncle, put her arms round his neck.

"I will go home with you, uncle," she said, "it will be best so," "and what more was said, or how he explained matters to her, I do not know," said Mademoiselle Mathilde, "for I went into the next room to take off my bonnet, and speak to the maid; but we all set off for Paris the next day."

The Princess Zaraikine then lived henceforth with her uncle, a kind, soft-hearted, refined old man, and his wife's sister, Mademoiselle de Brisac. I do not know that she ever came to England, or saw her grandfather again. Mr. Randolph had never professed much affection for this little woman-grandchild, who could do nothing for the honor of his family, and did not even bear his name. He did not interfere in her marriage, but assented to everything Monsieur de Florian proposed. His hopes in those days were fixed in another direction; and it was not till those hopes had come to an end, and then, only in his will, that he recognized his granddaughter's claims upon him. But her uncle loved her dearly; I have heard Ersilia say that nothing could exceed the indulgence and loving kindness of the old man, urged thereto partly, perhaps, by a sense of remorse at the disastrous conclusion of the marriage he had promoted; and the girl clung to him, no doubt, as the one prop left in a world that had become such an exceptional one to her—how exceptional one can imagine, thinking of the day when the consciousness of beauty must have dawned upon her, when she must have recognized that to her no charm or grace of womanhood had been denied—and to what end? To find herself a wife without a wife's privileges, robbed of her freedom, cut off from the sweet impulses and illusions of girlhood, bound at the very opening of life to a man who had scorned her and cast her on one side.

How Ersilia met these sore revelations that faced her on the threshold of womanhood, it does not concern Randolph to relate here. At much, indeed, he can but dimly guess; Mademoiselle Mathilde, his informant on many points, could have given him little information on this. From her, however, he learned in after years such details of the Princess Zaraikine's early life as he has given above; although months before he first met the old lady in the Pyrenees, he had, as I have said already, heard the history of his cousin's marriage in brief outline. He was at that time in Paris studying painting under Mr. Fleming, than whom no lad ever had a kinder or more friendly pro-

tector ; and this part of Randolph's own life is one that cannot be passed over altogether in silence.

I have said that Mr. Fleming knew and loved my father well. It was in Rome that they had met, during my father's brief married life, and Arthur Fleming, an art student in those days, some eight or ten years younger than my father, had received from him certain kindnesses which he repaid by the enthusiastic admiration that lads of a generous and imaginative temperament often conceive for men older than themselves. When my father died, and his wife was left alone with her infant son, it was Fleming who was most forward in helping her, who arranged for her departure from Rome, who, as far as possible, took all trouble off her hands. He never forgot his early friendship. He wrote occasionally to my mother, and though he himself rarely came to England, he sent the little lad, her son, more than one kind token and remembrance ; and when, years after, that little lad, grown into a tall stripling, declared his determination to be a painter and nothing else, it was to her husband's old friend that my mother naturally turned for counsel. Mr. Fleming first gave her much advice as to the direction of the boy's studies, and presently, when these were somewhat advanced, offered, if his mother would consent to his coming to Paris, to receive him there as his own pupil. The carrying out of this kindly plan was delayed for a time by the death of Humphrey's mother, and it was while the lad was still mourning her loss (for he had loved her passionately, and the narrow walls of home had still enclosed a large part of his world) that he came to Paris, and was received by Arthur Fleming with open arms.

It was not, one may be sure, without strong opposition on the part of his uncle that Humphrey made and stood by his resolution to become an artist ; but he belonged to a new generation, on whom prejudices of a certain class sit more lightly, perhaps, than on our forefathers, and Mr. Randolph found this younger nephew more impracticable than his father had been before him. The boy had

loved drawing long before he could understand what such a love meant; as a mere child he had never been happier than with a pencil in his hand, and in long winter evenings he had found no employment so delightful as that of copying his father's old sketches, which in those days he looked upon as some of the finest works of art in the world. The half undefined artistic tastes that for years had kept my father hovering between his uncle's favor and the forbidden world of art, took a stronger and more passionate form in Humphrey, inspired as he was by the beliefs that, still uncertain in the father, had become strong and guiding traditions to the son. It was not without a certain exultation that, remembering that father's history, Humphrey resisted his uncle's first attempts at coercion and replied to Mr. Randolph's threats of disinheriting him (for the boy, like his father, had been brought up as his uncle's half-acknowledged heir) by resigning all pretensions to his favor. He acted from an irresistible impulse which he felt to be right, which left no room for repentance; and yet there was a pathos, which he can feel now, in the bitter silence with which the old man met this rebellion on the part of the lad on whom, for the second time, he had set all his hopes. Mr. Randolph said no further words in exposition, but he henceforth ignored his nephew's existence; and when he died, shortly before Humphrey went to Paris, it was found that by his will the family estates passed to a distant cousin, whilst all his money and personal property, together with his house in Kensington, were bequeathed to his granddaughter, the Princess Zaraikine.

Humphrey's mother, very likely, lamented this change in her boy's prospects more than Humphrey himself, who was not of an age to care much about money, and to whom the possession of a large estate would have been an intolerable burden, which he has all his life been thankful to have escaped. For the rest, his old grandfather dying about the same time, enabled Humphrey to carry on his studies with sufficient ease. The old man had

been a regular miser, and though his rheumatic lameness, which prevented his going about the house, had enabled my mother to carry out her own ideas of housekeeping, his habits have caused her many and many an hour of uneasiness, I know.

"Well, lad, well, and what have you got in your pockets to-day?" he would ask Humphrey on his return from one of his visits to Kensington, and if, as sometimes happened, for Mr. Randolph was always liberal with his money, the boy pulled out a handful of sovereigns, the old fellow would stretch out a trembling hand to take them.

"Best let me have 'em, lad; best let me have 'em," he would say, "I'll take care of them for you; they'll grow none the less on my hands, and you'll be all the richer for it some day."

On his return from that first visit to his uncle's, little Humphrey, half-frightened, half seduced by these promises, parted with his fine new gold sovereign, and then went away feeling very blank at the loss of his treasure. An hour afterwards, however, his mother brought it back to him.

"Here is your sovereign, Humphrey," she said, "grandfather does not really want it, and I had rather you spent it yourself, my lad, on something useful. You can buy that new paint box you were talking of the other day."

The very last time Humphrey saw his grandfather, the old man, then lying on his death-bed, asked the old question.

"I have no money, grandfather," Humphrey answered, looking rather sadly at his mother, who with a large Bible before her, was seated at the bedside.

"Ay, ay, you've spent it all, I reckon," said the old man, with his wandering hands and eyes, "you've always been over free with your money, Humphrey. You should read your Bible like your mother, lad; yes, you may read another chapter, if you like, Sylvie," this to my mother. "I've learnt a deal out of the Bible, I have, none

can say I was not a scholar and knew my catechism, and went to church regular in my day. I liked fine to hear the parson read out about the talents of silver and the pearl of great price that the trader sold all to possess. Eh, it must have been a fine pearl yon, but I'm not sure that he did the wisest thing with his savings. 'Twere like burying them in the ground, as the other man did. They give no interest, don't pearls. A snug loan here and there at a sure six per cent. that you can call in when you please, suits my book better. Mark my words, Humphrey, you're over free with your money, my lad."

"Eh, father, it's sad to hear you talk like that," my mother said, gently, "it's of heavenly riches the Bible speaks; there's nothing about earthly gain in it."

"Ay, ay, like enough, I'm not saying there's nought about heavenly riches. There's a deal about most things in the Bible; there's weddings for the lasses, and fighting enough for the lads. But there's a deal about money and trading, too, and as far as I can see, 'tis all on the side of them as is thrifty, and knows how to turn an honest penny. No man can say I've read my Bible for nought. Let's have another chapter, lass."

And so the old fellow passed away from his account books and money bags, in which, as I have said, a sufficient sum of money was found to enable Humphrey to continue the studies to which his grandfather, had he been alive, would never have contributed a penny.

It was in the early winter, rather more than a year after his grandfather's death, that Humphrey came to Paris. He was an enthusiastic, impressionable lad in those days, ready to mould himself to the first aspect of life that should appeal to his sympathies, and he adapted himself without difficulty to the ways of his master, for whom he quickly conceived an immense love and admiration. He found him leading a somewhat lonely life of perfect simplicity, inhabiting two or three rooms in the Rue de Clichy, and living in the society of his pictures, his books, and one or two friends of his own standing. It was a solitude into which he had drifted as one could imagine,

rather than one which he had deliberately chosen, a loneliness from which he suffered without the power of escaping from it, for he had neither the instincts nor the habits of a sociable man. He was too courteous and sympathetic by nature to be eccentric, but he had in him the elements of eccentricity—a hatred of the conventionalities of society, a keen and humorous feeling for their absurdities, and a melancholy which at once made itself felt in intercourse with him. It was a melancholy partly constitutional, the result of a sensitive temperament too keenly alive for joy, to the mystery of life for ever overshadowed by the darkness of change and death, and partly engendered by his life and by his work, which, when Randolph first knew him, was the one absorbing interest of that life. Humphrey, of course, looked upon his master as one of the greatest painters that ever lived, and judging his pictures with a clearer judgment in these days, he still thinks he was not far wrong; for, with a profound knowledge of his art, he had also more than any man I ever knew, the gift of poetic insight and selection—a genius altogether rare, original, and within its own limits, perfect, with an indescribable charm that, like the evening sunlight, transfigured and idealized every object that it touched. No one ever formed a truer estimate of his own powers than Mr. Fleming, but no one was ever less reconciled to the impossibility of over-stepping these limits of his own genius. “I will do all that other men have done, and more,” we say at the opening of life. “I am but one among many, and can do only that which is given me to do,” is what most of us have to acknowledge before its close. Mr. Fleming had learned this wisdom like another, but it was with a melancholy resignation, which colored all his life, that he accepted these invisible barriers set round men by fate. It was a disposition that in a less generous-tempered man might have led to a restless self-assertion, an unjust disparagement of the merits of others; in him it produced a large appreciation of the powers he did not himself possess, a wise toleration of even the follies of

other men, from whom he thought he might learn something.

"I rather like to hear these young fellows talk," he said to a friend, one day, after listening patiently for an hour to the rodomontade of a young Frenchman. "After all they keep the world alive, and may do good work some day, if they will take the trouble to learn. That young fellow, now, who has just gone out—"

"He is a conceited ass and an intolerable bore," interrupted Randolph, who happened to be present.

"So he is, Humphrey ; and I don't expect you to be tolerant of him, my boy. You are much too full of a good opinion of yourself to stand other people's conceit just yet. Well, that young fellow has brains, do you know, though not nearly so many as he fancies. He won't improve upon Michael Angelo, I take it, as he suggested doing, just now ; but he may do some very good work in his own way, when he has found out what he can't do. And I am not sure that he was not right upon one or two points ; he said one or two things worth remembering—"

Humphrey was Mr. Fleming's only pupil, nor, in the early days after his arrival in Paris, did the lad care to make any other friends. He came saddened from his mother's death-bed, where he had sat day after day during her short illness, and he still felt her loss to be an overwhelming grief. A hundred times they had talked together of this journey to Paris ; of his future life ; of all that he was to do, and to be. He was to have written to her ; to have painted his first picture for her ; she was to have shared in all his triumphs ; she would have sympathized in all his failures. The love between the mother and son had been very great ; and I think that it was when Mr. Fleming, discovering this, and the cause of his pupil's fits of moody depression, cheered and encouraged him with a kindness and sympathy than which no woman's could have been tenderer, that Humphrey began to give his master that love and reverence which in the midst of all the waywardness and wilful alienation

of after-days he never quite lost. He still looks back with gratitude on that unfailing helpfulness and affection, whilst it pleases him to think that the simplicity of Mr. Fleming's tastes and habits, his noble aims, and single-minded devotion to his work, have not been without their influence on his own life in all the years that have come since.

It was during this winter that Humphrey heard from an English artist, lately come from Rome, something of the story of his cousin Ersilia's life. Every one knew the Princess Zaraikine by reputation, his informant said ; no lady in Rome had so fair a fame for beauty and accomplishments, and no words could express the admiration and sympathy with which she was regarded. But she was known to few personally, for she lived a life of great seclusion, rarely going into society, and then only amongst her uncle's most intimate friends. Occasionally, she would appear at one of his receptions, sometimes she would visit a studio in his company, and when her mother-in-law, the old Princess Zaraikine, was alive, she had constantly appeared at her parties, but that was some two or three years ago now.

"Did you not know that there had been a Dowager Princess?" the artist said ; "she was a great invalid, but a very charming and distinguished woman, and she and her daughter-in-law were devoted to each other. She cast the entire blame of the separation that took place so soon after his marriage on her son, as, indeed, who would not? Every one but his mother perhaps, and that well-meaning old fool, M. de Florian, who thought he had got a fine match for his niece when he married her straight out of her convent to a man nearly three times her age, knew that the Prince was madly in love with a Polish Countess, who was already provided with a husband, and that he only married your cousin for her money. Having got what he wanted, he left her, and followed his Countess to Naples, to Berlin, to Paris, to Heaven knows where. The thing was notorious. It was she, they say, who dragged him into that Polish con-

spiracy, in which she was engaged heart and soul. It is hard to believe of a Russian, but there is nothing impossible, I suppose, when a woman is in the case. He paid for it at any rate, when he was shot or drowned—nobody knows exactly what happened—in making his escape. But is it possible you never heard the story before?"

"Never," said Humphrey. "I have heard nothing of my cousin for years, and I have not seen her since I was nine years old. Do you know M. de Florian?"

The Englishman laughed. "Who does not know M. de Florian?" he said. "He is the best known man in Rome. He has receptions every Tuesday evening, to which every one goes. He haunts the studios, he talks art, he passes judgment on our pictures. He is not a bad judge either, the old fellow; I speak of him with respect, he bought two of my pictures only the other day. He is always buying something. During the summer he travels in Germany or Holland, and hunts for bric-a-brac; or he goes to Greece and digs up old coins and helmets. His house is crammed with these things, and they are worth looking at, too, for he knows what he is about, and understands buying china better than marrying his niece. He is a good-natured, pottering old fellow, and we all like him, though we laugh at him too, a little."

Only a few days afterwards, this same artist came to tell Humphrey that he had received a letter from Rome, informing him of the death of M. de Florian. "He will buy no more of my pictures," the young man said, "I have lost a patron—but let that pass. I am sorry for your cousin, Randolph; she will miss her uncle, for they were very fond of each other. She travelled with him everywhere, and one for ever met them riding or driving together. Now she has no one left but that painted old heathen, Mademoiselle de Brisac, who used to scowl at us from under her wig at M. de Florian's receptions. She hated the English, and always took care to let us know it."

Six months later, Humphrey, gone to the Pyrenees for a summer holiday, read in the visitor's book of the

hotel at which he was staying, the names of Mademoiselle de Brisac, and the Princess Zaraikine. It was with no small curiosity and excitement that the lad found that he should see his cousin again, that unknown lady, the praise of whose beauty had reached his ears—that little playmate of an April day that fell ten years ago.

CHAPTER IV.

A Boy's Paradise.

SOMETHING of sadness comes over the writer of these pages as he approaches this portion of his task. The night has fallen whilst he has been writing, the fire-light glances upon his page, over the roofs of the opposite houses the stars shine in the wintry sky. The sound of the life of the great city comes to him monotonously in rolling carriages, in passing footsteps, in the confused, inarticulate murmur of a million voices, that for ever rise and fall ; nearer at hand, two little feet patter along the passage, one little voice chirps and twitters, and is suddenly hushed behind a banging door. That little voice is very sweet in the father's ear, although he foresees that it also will pass away from him willingly in the years to come. Already he fancies it chirps more blithely to others than to him, and a spirit that is not his, looks out like a haunting memory, a perpetual prophecy, through his child's pretty blue eyes. "Your world is not my world," it seems to say, "let me go." Well, he will let her go. Something of sadness, I say, comes over him. He is a silent, lonely, already grey-haired man in these days ; the best of life perhaps is passing from him now ; such fame, or praise, or blame as it had in store for him, he has tasted, not caring greatly, it may be, for any of these things, indifferent, perhaps, to a praise without discrimination, to a censure that he never shunned, to a success that came to him at a time when he cared little for it. He knows what his work is, and does it with the best power that is in him ; but he has measured the height of its possibilities, the splendor of its perfection,

against his own proved powers of performance, and he knows that he has accomplished this, and no more. Whatever the value of his work may be—and, indeed, he holds it not quite valueless—still, it is only this and no more.

But he has to write of a time when the hopes of life were inspiring as wine, when the failures of other men filled him a wondering impatience at a pitiful experience in which he could never have a share, when to know meant to do, to perceive, to accomplish. That time did not last long, those days were not many in number ; disappointments and defeats came to him as to others ; in the path where most men trip, he, too, stumbled and fell. But it is with a sort of affection, of regretful tenderness, that he still thinks of the lad to whom all things seemed more possible than shortcomings and failures, before whom life lay spread out as a fair land whose dim, far-off horizon was hidden by the white blossoming trees of promise. The fruit is ripening now and he plucks it, not without delight in his accomplished work ; but the morning red had faded from the sky, and through the thinning branches he seems to see the horizon narrowing day by day.

It was such a lad as this then, full of such confident hopes, of such pleasant illusions, who once again met his cousin Ersilia at the Pyrenean village of the Eaux-Bonnes. The greeting between the two was simple almost as it had been when they met as children ten years before. Some echo, perhaps, of that childish sentiment still vibrating through all these years, at once gave the tone to their future intercourse, which, on the Princess Zaraikine's part, was always one of perfect frankness and simplicity. And if Randolph, on his side, presently began to cherish that passion of devotion and adoration which characterises a boy's first love, he said not a word of it in those days we may be sure, feeling instinctively, no doubt, that any such words might at once end the sweet and frank companionship which had for him, in its commencement at any rate, a quiet inexpressible charm.

Nor to Ersilia herself, I think, can that charm have

been altogether wanting. In the somewhat colorless medium in which the flower of her young life had slowly expanded, there can have been little place for anything young, ardent, and hopeful. A lonely child, a lonelier woman, her sympathies had been claimed by the kindly whims, the growing infirmities of her uncle, by the lingering illness of the Princess Zaraikine, her mother-in-law, by the varying caprices of Mademoiselle Mathilde. Her intellectual sympathies had had a wider scope, indeed, under the tuition of Monsieur de Florian, a man of no ordinary cultivation and refinement ; but they had lain chiefly with the unknown living, the mighty dead, whose books she had read, whose works she had studied in half the churches and picture galleries of Europe. And with whatever pure enthusiasm she claimed her share in this heritage of ages, recognizing that she also was one of those for whom the past has wrought, to whom the past appeals to justify its work, there must yet have come, as it were, pauses when, amidst the budding trees, perhaps, the calling birds, the opening flowers, books, and poems, and pictures must for a moment have seemed like last years' leaves strewn upon the path in the sudden imperative craving of a young living soul for its own part in the present beauty and fulness of life.

When Humphrey first met her in the Pyrenees it was already nearly a twelve-month since the news of her husband's death had restored to her the freedom of which he had deprived her more than five years before ; but since then her uncle's death, her departure from Rome, the breaking up of old ties and associations, had filled her life with fresh sadness. A profound melancholy still seemed to overshadow and influence her whole being, and I can imagine now (for in those days I thought of none of those things, nor cared to analyze a subtle charm) that she may have found no little pleasure in this new experience of some one belonging to her, youthful, eager, enthusiastic, and full of a thousand unproved hopes, and plans, and aspirations.

The Princess Zaraikine then, who knew no one at the

Eaux-Bonnes, whither she had come on Mademoiselle Mathilde's account, had always a kindly welcome for her cousin, and after their first meeting there were few days on which Humphrey did not find his way to the *salon* she occupied in the Hotel de —. He remembers still the aspect of the dim, silent room, where closed Venetian blinds made a welcome shade and coolness, the open piano, the clock ticking and striking the hours with an echoing ting, Mademoiselle Mathilde nodding drowsily to him from her arm-chair, Ersilia looking up with a smile to greet him. All through the hot hours of the afternoon he would sit drawing at the little table set in the window, whilst Ersilia, who at his entrance would lay aside her book or writing, sat opposite to him on the sofa at her embroidery frame. She worked very beautifully, and had learned from her mother-in-law, the Princess Zaraikine, some almost lost art of Oriental embroidery which the elder lady had acquired in her youth in a Russian convent.

"I used not to care about work," Ersilia said one day in answer to some remark of Humphrey's, "and there are things now that I prefer doing. But at one time I was in the habit of spending many hours every day with my mother-in-law, who had a great love for fine and beautiful needlework, and I learned to care about it first for her sake and then for its own. I like to see the pattern growing and spreading over the empty cloth. I feel towards my working materials," she said with a smile, "much as a sculptor does towards his block of marble. I know that future leaves and flowers lie hidden in that heap of colored silks, and I like to see them shaping themselves by degrees. That seems to you a trivial kind of creation, Humphrey, but it is the only one of which I am capable."

"I don't know why you should say that," said Humphrey, "I should think you could do anything, and your work is almost as beautiful as a picture. You ought to be an artist—why not? Women have been painters, sculptors, poets before now."

A look, a flash passed over her face and was gone. "Not this woman," she said, and then sat silent for a while, her cheek resting on her hand. "I think I am no genius, Humphrey," she said at last, smiling a little. "I cannot paint pictures, nor compose music, nor even write verses, and that augurs ill for a future Corinne, you will allow."

"But that is merely a question of expression," Humphrey answered, "and if one has the feeling, the spirit—as you have, I know. I can hear it in your music when you are playing, and at other times—I have seen your face change—"

"Yes," she said, resuming her work, "there are certain things that affect me, that always have affected me strangely, but it is a spirit of dumbness, not of prophecy, that comes over me. With you, Humphrey, it is different. What you feel you can express, and often in looking at your drawings I find that they interpret to me clearly my own dim thoughts; they reveal to me ideas of which I had no perception before. I think you have great genius. I look forward to your being a great man some day."

So she said with a simple earnestness, an exquisite kindness that shone in her eyes and made itself felt in her voice as she spoke; never had surely had a sweeter inspiration. And Humphrey, who in those days was indefatigable at his work, was seldom without some new sketch that he was eager to show and to explain to this kind and sympathetic listener, who had that gift of rarest fascination to a young artist whose powers of expression are still subordinate to his powers of imagination—the gift of a woman's ready and subtle comprehension of subtle meanings and ideas. If, as she herself affirmed, she had no creative genius, she had yet one of the finest and clearest intellects I ever knew, and that sympathetic appreciation of the creations of others, that informs them with new meanings, and is itself so nearly allied to genius that it can bear no other name.

Do I exaggerate? I do not know. I know only that

Ersilia seemed to me then, as she seems to me in my recollection of her now, unlike any other woman in the world. In all that she said and did there was a sweet and womanly friendliness, and unselfish cheerfulness, that no grief or trials could ever quite quench, and which gave a new charm to every word and action. I think she was naturally silent, but she constantly aroused herself to talk, as one accustomed to be much with old and sick people to whom cheerful trivial histories are welcome as field-flowers to one imprisoned—tokens from a life no longer shared. Often when she and Randolph returned from one of the mountain walks they presently began to take together, she would sit down by Mademoiselle Mathilde, and recalling a hundred incidents, unnoticed by Humphrey, would weave them into a long and pleasant tale to enliven the old lady. In manner she was at once frank and reserved, open and reticent. She had but few friends, and I think would never have cared to have many, for she made few demands on the love and sympathy of others. Hers was a sweet and cheerful, yet lonely spirit, so it seemed to Randolph, that had long since learned to live its own life apart.

It was in the afternoon and evening that Humphrey spent those hours with the Princess Zaraikine which soon appeared to the boy like hours of Paradise suddenly let down into the midst of the common world. In the morning she was generally engaged with Mademoiselle Mathilde who was going through a course of baths and waterdrinking ; but in the afternoon Ersilia was at liberty and sometimes alone. A band played every day on the public Place, and Mademoiselle Mathilde who liked of all things to be amused, and was constantly complaining of the dulness of the Eaux Bonnes, used to declare that the only thing that kept her alive at all, was sitting under the trees and watching the people who came to hear the music.

"Are you coming to the band this afternoon, Ersilia?" she would say, "I am going out immediately. I have just seen the best-dressed woman in the Eaux-Bonnes pass up the road, and I must positively find out how her

gown is made. She will probably be at the band, but if I do not go at once I may probably miss her altogether. In a place like this, people are here to-day and gone to-morrow. There is nothing more tiresome ; one can count upon nothing. Are you coming, Ersilia ?”

“ Would you like me to accompany you, Aunt Mathilde ? I don't think I care about it otherwise,” Ersilia answered in her sweet cordial tones, which had in them at times the ring of acquired cheerfulness that always gives a touch of pathos to a young voice, the cheerfulness that comes from the giving, not the receiving, of the brightness of life.

“ Not at all, my dear child ; on the contrary, I much prefer being alone. I know there is nothing that you hate so much, and it distracts me to the last degree to see you sitting beside me looking bored to death. But I thought I would ask you to-day, in case you might like to come. Eh, one must amuse one's self a little in this world ; one grows rusty soon enough without sitting moping at home all day.”

Mademoiselle Mathilde put this same question, and made this same kind of answer every day, not because she desired Ersilia's company, for as she truly said, she preferred to be by herself ; but because though shrewd and kindly enough in some ways, she was, through a certain obtuseness of perception in the matter of the sentiments of others, one of these people upon whom any amount of iteration fails to make more impression than the proverbial drop of water on a duck's back. So at least Humphrey thought at that time, as day after day he heard her deliver these speeches and then go bustling away quite contentedly, whilst Ersilia would sit looking a little pale, a little weary, a look that came readily to her face in those days, as Randolph remembers now. But perhaps he did Mademoiselle Mathilde an injustice ; he thinks now that there may have been a kindly intention in her old heart, and she was not so insensible as she appeared to be to Ersilia's sensitive dislike to general society, a dislike which had its origin probably in emotions

not difficult to guess at, and which was perhaps the one morbid point in her character.

"Ersilia was always over-sensitive to my mind," Mademoiselle Mathilde once said years afterwards, talking to Randolph of these long past days, "when we were in Rome I used constantly to urge her to go more into society ; it was so bad for a young thing like that to have none of the gaiety and amusements of her age. But I never could persuade her—she lived the life of a nun, as I used to say. I believe it was partly that she had a dread of being talked about—of course she was talked about ; no young woman separated from her husband could expect it to be otherwise, especially a girl like Ersilia, who, married or unmarried, might have had all Rome at her feet if she had liked. Eh, we are all flesh and blood together, and it is give and take all the world over. I have heard plenty of scandal in my day, and talked it too for that matter ; why not ? we none of us can live under a bushel, and my poor Ersilia was no worse off than another. I said as much to her one day to console her. 'My dear child,' I said, 'why should you mind what people say about you ? They will talk as long as the world lasts, and one cannot expect them always to speak the truth ; they want to use too many words for that, but words hurt nobody, and you may be sure no one thinks of blaming you. And if they did, you won't mend matters, or stop people's tongues by shutting yourself up.' She fired up all at once, I remember, and then turned as white as a sheet. 'Who—who talks ?' she said, and then walked straight out of the room. I remember it as if it were yesterday ; it was in the first winter after her marriage, when we were at Rome. I never dared to say another word to her on that subject, but it would have been better for her if she had gone out more ; it was unnatural for a girl of her age to shut herself up as she did. But she had other notions, too, about her position as a married woman—Heaven knows what notions the child did not take into her head about herself, and her husband, and her duties—and all I could

say was of no use. Afterwards, when things were different, and there was no earthly reason why she should not do as she chose, the old habits suited her best, I suppose."

Whether Mademoiselle Mathilde was right in her supposition, I do not know, but it is certain that the Princess Zaraikine cared little for the second-rate Parisian pomps and vanities that daily spread themselves out on the tree-shaded Place at the Eaux-Bonnes.

"Let us go for a walk, Humphrey," she said one day, "let us go to the ravine that you may finish your sketch, or else up into the mountains where we shall meet no one. You do not care to see all these people in their Paris dresses, do you? I think they are as inharmonious in the midst of these mountains and forests as an Italian opera air would be introduced into one of Beethoven's symphonies."

She laid aside her work as she spoke, whilst Humphrey, who thought that life held no greater honor than to walk at that fair lady's side, consented readily enough, we may be sure, and after this they made more than one excursion together in the long summer days. Sometimes accompanied by a guide they went far up the mountain side. Sometimes they found their own way amongst the forest paths that stretched for miles in every direction. Sometimes they went no further than to a ravine lying directly above the village, where they passed at once from noise and gaiety into a world of wildness, solitude, and grandeur, forests rising on either side, a torrent roaring and foaming below; above, one snow-flecked peak that forever caught the latest sunset gleam, or shone faintly radiant in the lingering after-glow.

Once leaving these higher mountains, these upper gorges behind them, they wandered down to where in the peaceful, fertile, lower valley, amidst maize-fields and meadows, hedges and poplars, a little town stood on the winding stream—a little old town with one long street where heavy, arched door-ways of black marble framed spaces of sunny green country beyond, where dried up

faces looked out from windows above, and children in long-skirted frocks and tight little red and blue caps sat upon the door-steps below, or ran shouting and clamoring after the tall strange lady and her companion as they passed along the street. "*Un p'tit sou, madame, un p'tit sou,*" they cried, holding out bunches of half-withered flowers. Ersilia gave them all her sous, and presently had all the flowers, which the children, awed into sudden shyness by her thanks and smile, silently put into her hands.

The way from the Eaux-Bonnes to this town was so long, as Randolph remembers, and they lingered so much on the road, that it was already late, and Ersilia was almost tired out before they turned homewards again; nor do I know how she would have got back at all, but for a friendly passing cart which picked up these two imprudent wanderers and willingly carried them on their way. A woman with her distaff sat spinning as they jogged along, a child at her feet gazed at the strangers with wide-open eyes, an old, old man sat all huddled up in one corner. Presently the darkness fell swiftly, the long, white road gleamed always upwards, the amphitheatre of mountains loomed more and more mysteriously as the daylight tints faded, dim masses with sharply-cut summits defined against the shining stars, the transparent purple of the sky.

The cart rumbled along to the jingling of its bells; the child dropped asleep, then waking, cried out, frightened at finding itself under those solemn starry heavens, and the woman taking it on her lap hushed it to sleep again. She was a woman with a long, heavy, melancholy face, such as one sees in that part of the world—the men seem to follow a better type, keener, finer. Presently she began to talk in her odd French, and her voice was melancholy too.

"She had been to a wedding," she said, "she had come a long way to it, and was going to sleep that night at the Eaux-Bonnes; but she did not live there, she lived at Gabas, the village away up in the mountains," pointing with her right hand. "She kept an inn, and when Mon-

sieur and Madame came there, she hoped they would descend at her house. In the summer plenty of people came, and it was gay enough ; but in the winter the snow fell and blocked up the roads, and sometimes one saw no one for months together. She was used to it ; she had lived there all her life, and had never been further down the valleys than that," pointing again to the little town that they had left behind them. "Did Madame come from a long way off? Were they Christians in the country Madame came from? Eh, she might have known that ; a beautiful lady like Madame, with a face like a blessed saint, could not be anything but a Christian. Madame was married? She had no children? She, the woman had four. Her eldest was a guide, as his father had been before him. If Monsieur wanted a guide at any time, no one knew the mountains better than her Baptiste—"

So she talked on in her low melancholy tones, combining business with gossip, after the fashion of her class ; but presently she also ceased speaking, and all was silent as they jolted slowly onwards up the winding road. Only once, as the breeze blew chilly, Humphrey, who had swung himself out of the cart when the way grew steeper, and now walked by its side, helped Ersilia to wrap her shawl more closely round her.

"I am afraid you are cold," he said, filled with remorse at having led her so far from home, "and I am sure you must be horribly uncomfortable in this jolting concern."

She was leaning back in her corner, her face turned from him towards the mountains, but she looked round at his words.

"I am a little cold," she said ; "but I do not mind the jolting, and its worth some discomfort to have this wide night view of mountains and sky."

She smiled as she spoke, to reassure him, and in the dim light he seemed to see all the mystery of those far-shining heavens reflected in her eyes, and was satisfied. As for him—that fair presence was near him, that sweetest

influence was upon him ; I think that at that moment he would have asked nothing better of life than to go on thus forever through that clear darkness, beneath those stars, in that immense harmony of earth and heaven. Long afterwards—in truth, it was but a few months, but there are times when life is not counted by the calendar—long afterwards then, I say, Humphrey, making another star-lit journey with this same companion under other skies, looked back with a sort of wondering doubt on the unexpectant tranquillity, the accepted peace of this summer night—as one who, waking in the frozen darkness of a winter morning, doubts of the golden light, the birds and flowers of the summer that has been.

I have heard that amongst Roman Catholics the women have a custom of sometimes going into *retraite*, as it is called, of retiring from the world for a while, to seek peace and quiet for meditation according to the capacity that is in them. I do not know how this arbitrary seclusion, this stated silence answers, nor whether worldly thoughts and troubles, restless ambition and anxieties, turn at a moment's bidding before those grated doors. But in some lives there come now and then natural *retraites*, as it were, when for a time life seems to pause, rest comes after labor, calm after sorrow, peace after the weariness of conflicting emotions. Such a time as this came, I think, to Ersilia during those early weeks in the Pyrenees.

"Now let us be silent, Humphrey," she would sometimes say, as they sat resting during their mountain excursions ; and whilst he sketched at her side, she would sit for an hour at a time, her book lying neglected in her lap, occupied with thoughts in which he had no share, of which she never spoke to him. Old ties and associations were broken off, a past full of pain had ended in sadness ; but a new life was opening before her, and each day, after these silent musings, something of new energy and hopefulness seemed to light up her eyes, and tinge her cheek, as, after years of self repression, her young capacity for happiness and action began to assert itself again.

Sometimes, however, she would betray the course her thoughts had taken by beginning to talk of La Chênaie, Monsieur de Florian's estate, of which mention has already been made, and which at his death had passed to the Princess Zaraikine. Ersilia had an affection for the place, which she had known since her childhood ; and she liked talking of it to Humphrey, describing to him the old grey walled château, the farm-buildings and neglected flower-garden, the woods rising steeply behind, the terrace and lawn sloping downwards in front to a narrow winding river. It was a country she loved, she said, for its perfect repose and stillness : she had already spent some weeks there since leaving Rome in the early spring ; and she proposed going there again in the autumn, whilst Mademoiselle Mathilde paid some visits amongst old friends.

"But you are not going to stay there?" said Humphrey, in some alarm. "You told me you were going to spend next winter in Paris."

"Yes," she said ; "I promised Aunt Mathilde that I would not leave her at present. She has given up her Paris life for so many years, that she would feel lonely at first without me, so we shall be together next winter. Otherwise I should have remained in the country—that will be my home now, you know. But indeed, on my own account," she went on, "I shall not be sorry to be in Paris. I do not know that I have many rural tastes ; a great part of the charm of our former visits to La Chênaie came through contrast, and I believe I should get tired of the silence and solitude after a time. I like to feel a great rush of life round me, to know that I am in the midst of large interests, even when I have no part in them, and though I have an affection for La Chênaie, I own that I have some dread of living there."

"But why should you live there," said Humphrey, "forgive me, but why should you ever dream of burying yourself in such a place?"

"It is my property now," she said, "there are people on the estate whom I am bound to know and to care for

whose welfare in some sort depends upon me. And I do care for them, only I cannot feel—how can I explain myself?—that they are in very great need of me, that my presence amongst them is essential to their happiness. My uncle's steward, who has managed the property for twenty years, takes excellent care of everything ; everyone is well off, and as contented as their lives will allow them to be ; there is nothing that I can set about at once and feel that I am doing good. I have, indeed, some ideas—Utopian ones perhaps—that I greatly desire to carry out ; but when I speak of them to my steward, he tells me they are innovations that it would not do for me to attempt just yet. That is why I feel that I ought by and by to go and live there, that I may gain a practical knowledge of all sorts of things that I know very little about at present."

"If your people are so well off, I should let them alone," Humphrey answered, "you could never be happy in such a life, buried in the country away from all you most care for. I know something about it ; I know what a country life can be, and that one woman though she had been brought up to it as a girl, and so liked it in a way, never forgot the glimpse she had once had into a different kind of world."

"Your mother ?" said Ersilia, "I should like to have known her, Humphrey. I think her life must have been a hard one, but mine would be different from that, you know. And I should not always live at La Chênaie ; I should come to Paris sometimes—perhaps, even go to Italy again some day."

"That would be all right," said the lad. He broke off as they began to make their way down a rocky turn in the road ; they had been crossing a sunlit flowery meadow as they talked, but now they were in the beech forest again, immediately above the grey roofs of the Eaux-Bonnes. In a minute they reached a wider path, and then Humphrey spoke again.

"That would be all right," he repeated, "still it seems to me hard that you who are so—so different, so

—I mean," he said, changing the sentence, "it is hard that you should have to live at all amongst a set of boors."

"Do you mean the people at La Chênaie?" said Ersilia, "they are not boors, they are a very kindly people. At present, I don't understand enough about their lives and ideas to get on very well with them; all that I have known and cared for lies so widely apart from their interests, that I feel sometimes as if we were speaking to each other in strange languages. But perhaps in time I shall learn better, and after all it may be only a question of learning. I can imagine that a country life, rightly understood, may be full of interest, just as this silent forest is full of life and movement, if only we had the eyes to see and the ears to hear it."

"We don't want to hear it," said Humphrey, "it might deafen us to things we care more for."

"That may be true for you, Humphrey, but not for me; I ought to know about many things that I am ignorant of, I should like to do good to these people if I knew how. They are not altogether happy; there is a pathos about their lives that it is not difficult to perceive and understand—their dumbness and blindness in the presence of beautiful scenes that might be a continual joy to them. I should like to change their lives in that respect if I could, but it is precisely there that I meet with difficulties—"

The path narrowed again, and she said no more, and Humphrey, too, was silent for a while, as they continued their descent through the forest. But presently the lad began to talk eagerly again, as was his custom when that kind lady was at his side—of his boyhood, of Mr. Fleming, of Rome, of all things in Heaven and earth. It was the last of those mountain rambles with the Princess Zaraikine—that very evening as they crossed the Place on their way to the hotel, he saw his master and ran to welcome him—but he did not know it. He never guessed as he guided Ersilia down the mountain path that the sun was setting on the last of those early days at the

Eaux-Bonnes, on which, in his memory, no one shadow of darkness rests. No cloud, it seems to him, looking back now, had marred the serenity of the sky, or dimmed the sunlight falling on grey peaks above, on green sloping uplands below ; no storm had broken the stillness of the night, as the stars rose and flashed and sank below the dim mountains ; and to Humphrey it had seemed, I dare say, that they were alone, he and his cousin, in that Paradise of mountains, forests, and valleys, that those stars shone, that those sunrisings and sunsettings glowed for them alone, that those peaks rose on every side to shut them out from the world—the world that seemed to him so slight a thing since it was unconscious of his love. For the lad, as I have said, loved his cousin with that first love, which, be it the mother's for her first born, the girl's for her lover, the boy's for his mistress, lives apart in the memory as a peculiar and sacred revelation of all that is divinest in a human soul.

“The first effect of love is to inspire a great respect—we reverence what we love. This is very right ; in the whole world there is nothing to be found as grand as this. . . . The pleasure of loving without daring to speak of it has its pain, but it has also its sweetness. What transport is there in shaping every action with the view of pleasing the one person whom one finds infinitely worthy of esteem.” . . .

So said a writer of another age and land than ours, of an experience common to all lands and to all ages.

“But,” he adds, “this state of mind cannot long endure.”

CHAPTER V.

The Gates begin to close.

MR. FLEMING had come to the Pyrenees for a few weeks' holiday ; but as it had already been arranged that he and Humphrey should together see as much as they could of the mountains, he had no intention of remaining for more than a few days at the Eaux-Bonnes. This, I say, had been already arranged before Humphrey left Paris ; the two had talked over their plans together a dozen times, and the lad who had never travelled, had looked forward with delight to this excursion in his master's company. Yet, when on this first evening of his arrival Mr. Fleming already began to inquire about routes and guides, it was with a sudden pang that Humphrey thought of their departure.

"Do you really mean to leave the Eaux-Bonnes at the end of the week, Sir ?" he said, "there is a great deal to be seen about here, no end of excursions and that sort of thing, I believe ; and I have not made half of them yet. I have been waiting for you."

"Not made half the excursions, Mr. Humphrey ?" cried Mademoiselle Mathilde, from her corner by the window. They were all sitting together in the Princess Zaraikine's salon. Humphrey had spent most of his evenings there lately ; and Mademoiselle Mathilde, who loved society before all things, and would sooner have spent an evening in the company of her worst enemy than by herself, had sent word to Humphrey that he was to be sure to come as usual, and bring Mr. Fleming with him.

“What have you and Ersilia been doing every day for the last fortnight,” she said, “if you have made no excursions?”

“We have been taking walks,” the lad answered, coloring a little. “I have a number of sketches to show you, Sir,” he continued to Mr. Fleming; “that is what I mean. You can have no idea what splendid points of view there are, unless you stay here quietly for a time.”

“My dear boy,” Mr. Fleming answered, pushing away the map he was studying, and laughing a little, “I came here to be quiet, and I have heard more squeaking and drumming and fiddling in the last half-hour than come in my way in a month in Paris. What do you advise, Madame?” he said, turning to Ersilia. “Are you of Humphrey’s opinion that I should make a long stay here?”

“No,” she answered, promptly, “there is scenery as fine, I believe, elsewhere in the Pyrenees, and if you dislike noise and bustle, you will not find this a pleasant place to stay in.”

She was standing at the table in the middle of the room, pouring out tea. Humphrey went to take a cup from her hand, and as he did so he said, with a boyish petulance that he could not wholly repress, “I can’t bear the idea of going away, but I suppose it makes no difference to you whether I am here or not.”

“It will make a great difference, Humphrey,” she answered, in her clear voice, “I shall miss you very much. But you know you told me long ago that you and Mr. Fleming were to travel together, so that I am prepared for the solitude in which Aunt Mathilde and I are to be left.”

She smiled as she spoke, but Humphrey only felt disconcerted. He set down his cup, and walked away to the piano at the other end of the room. It was true that he had once told Ersilia of his plans—how many days, weeks, months ago? He had hardly thought of them lately. Time had been standing still for him in these last

days, and now all at once it had begun to move again; the sweet hours were slipping away that only yesterday he had seemed to hold in his hand; everything was beginning to shift and change. He sat down on the music-stool, and began strumming and striking heavy chords, looking out from his dusky corner at the lighted centre of the room. Mademoiselle Mathilde, with a *bombonnière*, a big green fan, a shaded lamp, and some packs of cards, was establishing herself at a table apart. It was her custom to spend the evening in playing intricate games of patience, inviting every one to assist at her rare triumphs. Ersilia, who had finished her tea-making, went up to the old lady, and began laying out her cards, a preliminary task that she was always glad to be spared.

"I will do that," said Humphrey, coming forward into the light, "if you will go and play something."

"Yes, go and play by all means, Ersilia," cried Mademoiselle Mathilde, "but I will lay out my cards myself, thank you, Mr. Humphrey, you bring me bad luck; the last time you arranged them I found all the twos and threes in the top row."

"That was through want of experience," Humphrey answered, laughing; "I had not learned the art of shuffling the cards into the right places beforehand, Mademoiselle."

He went away to the window which was set wide open to the night, and stood looking out into the darkness, and listening to Ersilia's music. She did not sing, but I think no finer or more sympathetic playing than her's could be heard. The piano was a little old one that she had found in the room when she came, and which might have been good in its day, but whose harmonies had faded now to a mere echo of their former selves, neither cracked nor out of tune, but tinkling with a faint, melodious sound. Ersilia, after trying it, had laid aside sonatas, and preludes and fugues, and she sat now playing simpler, old-world tunes that better suited the worn-out tone of the narrow keys. Humphrey stood at the window listening to these measures to which the feet of a past genera-

tion had beat time, and which had gathered the plaintiveness that belongs to vanished joys. They seemed to him to be telling each other, like old, old people, of the good old times when they were young, better times than could ever come again ; they harmonised with his mood, with the rustling night outside, with the clouds that were shifting and gathering about the mountain tops and hiding the unchanging stars.

The music stopped at last ; he was roused from his dream and looked round. Ersilia had risen from her seat, and Mr. Fleming, leaning forward in a low chair beside the piano, was turning over some of her music-books. Neither was speaking, but a feeling Humphrey had never known before prompted him to walk straight across the room to where Ersilia was standing.

"You have not played my favorite piece to-night," he said, in the petulant tone of reproach he had used before.

"Your favorite piece, Humphrey," she said, "which is that?"

"I thought you would have known," he said, "I have often asked for it—but no matter."

"No, I do not know, indeed," she said, perplexed, and perceiving that for some reason and for the first time in her experience, he was out of temper. "There are so many things that you like, and I thought I had played several of them to-night."

"Yes, you did, thank you," said Humphrey, half ashamed of his ill-humor ; "I beg your pardon—it is no matter. Shall I close the piano for you?" Then turning abruptly to Mr. Fleming, "Our best route," he said, "would be over the Col de Torte and down to Argelès——"

"Is nobody going to bed?" cried Mademoiselle Mathilde from her table ; "you can arrange your route to-morrow, Mr. Humphrey. Your playing is very pretty, Ersilia, but it distracts me exceedingly. I have not won a single game to-night."

CHAPTER VI.

Old Manuscripts.

MR. FLEMING and Randolph did not after all leave the Eaux-Bonnes at the time they had proposed. A day of gathering clouds, followed by a thunder-storm, was the prelude, as is often the case in those regions, to a week of persistent, pouring rain. Mr. Fleming, imprudently going out, returned home drenched and shivering, and found himself laid up the next day with a severe attack of cold and inflammation, with Humphrey established as his nurse, and the doctor for his daily visitor. This was an even drearier change than the lad anticipated. He remembers well the grey days that followed, the mountains hidden by mist, the low-hanging sky, the eternal plash and drip of the rain.

Mr. Fleming was at no time dangerously ill, but he kept his bed for nearly a week, and rose from it utterly prostrate and exhausted. He was not a good patient; he rebelled against pain and weariness, and like most nervous, imaginative people, lived his sufferings twice over through anticipation. Humphrey who had no experience in illness, used to loose patience and courage altogether sometimes, and would come dismally into the salon to consult the Princess Zaraikine and Mademoiselle Mathilde.

"You know all about illness, do you not?" he used to say to Ersilia, "what shall I do for Mr. Fleming? How can I cheer him? The doctor says he is better, but I can't help thinking he must be worse when I see him so restless and depressed." And Ersilia, who was well accustomed to watch tedious and lingering illness, would advise one thing and another, till at length, as the

weather cleared and began to brighten into warmth and sunshine again, Mr. Fleming also began to get brighter and to recover health and spirits.

The principal rooms at the hotel had doors opening on to a wooden gallery that ran round a central courtyard ; a cool breeze continually swept through this open corridor ; there was a sound of running water from a fountain below ; above, leaning at night over the balustrade, one could see the stars flashing in a space of black sky. Humphrey was lingering here one evening on his way to Mr. Fleming's room, when he saw Ersilia coming towards him, along the gallery, shielding her candle with her hand. She paused when she saw him standing there.

"How is Mr. Fleming to-night, Humphrey?" she said.

"He is better ; won't you come in and see him? He has been up since the morning."

"Will he care to have a visitor?" she said ; "if you think so, I will come."

She followed Humphrey, as he led the way down a long passage to another part of the hotel. He and his master had rooms opening into each other, and since Mr. Fleming had been able to get up, Humphrey had arranged his own room to answer as far as possible the purposes of a sitting-room. But it was small and ill-furnished, and looked bare and gloomy now as he and Ersilia entered. The window was open on to the hot blackness of another and smaller courtyard, and Mr. Fleming, pale and thin, was lying on the sofa beside it, shading his eyes with his hand from the dim light of the little lamp. He looked round, however, at the sound of the door opening, and Humphrey, who came in first, went up to him.

"I have brought you a visitor," he said, pleased with the thought of cheering him, "the Princess Zaraikine has come to see you, Sir."

"She is very good ; ask her to come in," said Mr. Fleming, starting up and looking dazzled and confused as Ersilia entered. She set her candle down where the light could not reach his eyes, and came forward to the

sofa. Mr. Fleming who was still so weak that he could hardly stand, wanted to rise and bring a chair forward, but she prevented him.

"Pray do not move," she said, "or I shall think I am disturbing you. You are better this evening, I hope. I have been very sorry to hear of your illness."

"Yes, I am very much better," said Mr. Fleming. "Humphrey, bring that arm-chair here for the Princess Zaraikine."

"Thank you," she said, "but I must not stay. My aunt is waiting tea for me. Will you not come and see us again, Mr. Fleming, as soon as you are able to leave your room? The other side of the hotel is cooler and pleasanter than this, and the change would perhaps do you good."

"This room is hot," Humphrey said; "when the sun shines it beats all day upon that high rock that shuts us in at the back, and by the evening everything feels baked through."

"That is very bad," said Ersilia, "but there is always fresh air in our sitting-room, and I hope Mr. Fleming will make as much use of it as he likes. We should not disturb you at all in the mornings," she went on in her simple, cordial tones, turning to him, "my aunt is generally out, and I am either with her, or I sit in my own room. I hope you will come."

"Thank you, I will," Mr. Fleming answered. Then, as she prepared to go, he raised himself, and stood leaning against the back of the sofa. "Thank you too for your visit to-night, Madame," he said, "it has cheered me."

"Has it?" she said. "That is well. Illness in a hotel is very dreary, and you have suffered a great deal, I am afraid. What does Humphrey do for you? Have you plenty of books and papers?"

"Humphrey is a capital nurse," said Mr. Fleming, "he is a good boy, and reads me to sleep every night. I think we should be very glad of some books, should we not, Humphrey? We are nearly at the end of our stock."

It was, I think, two days after this, that Mr. Fleming,

accompanied by Humphrey, made his way to the Princess Zaraikine's salon. They expected to find it empty, for as Ersilia had said, she seldom occupied it in the morning; but when Humphrey opened the door he saw her sitting at the table writing with a litter of papers about her. The sudden draught of air sent them flying, she looked up and saw her visitors pausing in the doorway.

"Pray come in," she said, rising and coming forward through the dim room to meet them. "There are some work-people in my room to-day," she went on in explanation, "that is how it happens that I am here this morning."

"But we are disturbing you, I am afraid," said Mr. Fleming.

"Not at all," she said, "I have only a letter to finish, and then I am going out. I am very glad that you are able to come. Stay, I will open the outside shutter; there is not much sunshine to-day, and you will be able to look out upon something green."

She set open the shutter as she spoke, letting in suddenly a whole world, as it seemed, of fresh air and light, of mountains and forests, green and dark under a cloudy sky. The trees were blowing about in the Place below; a few people were sitting under them, or sauntering up and down; but the week of bad weather had brought the season to an early close. Half the visitors had left, and the place was already comparatively empty.

"Thank you," said Mr. Fleming, "this is better than our prospect of four walls at the other side of the hotel, Humphrey."

He stood leaning against the window, looking out with new light in his eyes. All vague, adverse influences, sad and gloomy days, clouds, and mists and darkness, were apt to close in on Mr. Fleming's imagination like some intangible prison from which, in certain moods, he vainly strove to escape. Something of this he expressed to Ersilia now.

"I feel as the people do in the story books," he said, "when they have been shut up through some dismal enchantment, and the good fairy has come to set them free."

"That is a pleasant thought for me also," said Ersilia, smiling. "When I was a little girl I used always to think of what I would do if I were a fairy." All the kind thoughts that she had had seemed to be shining in her eyes as she spoke ; she moved away, and began collecting her scattered papers. "Do you understand Italian, Humphrey?" she said.

"No," he answered ; "not a word."

"Ah, then, you cannot help me ; I am in the midst of difficulties in some work I have undertaken. Look at these."

She gave him some of the written papers with which the table was strewed ; most of them were in her own distinct handwriting, but others, yellow with age, were covered with queer, twisted, and faded characters, which seemed to Humphrey quite illegible.

"What is this?" he said, "I cannot read a word of it. But Mr. Fleming could, I daresay ; he knows all the languages and all the dialects imaginable."

"Do you really?" said Ersilia, turning to him.

"Not exactly," he answered, smiling ; "Humphrey is sometimes given to hyperbole, I am afraid. But I do know Italian pretty well ; can I help you in any way?"

"I will tell you my difficulty," said Ersilia ; "these papers are part of a collection of old manuscripts that came into my uncle's possession one year that he was making a tour in Italy. He bought a boxful of old papers in some remote country place, and these were among them. I don't know if you care for such things, Mr. Fleming, but my uncle, who was a good judge, valued them highly."

"I do not wonder," he replied. He had come with his slow steps up to the table, and seating himself opposite Ersilia, he began examining the papers. "I always envy collectors," he said ; "no one draws such prizes in life as they do, and their satisfaction in them must be almost perfect. In manuscripts, too, they go on discovering all sorts of things one after another. These are written by different hands, I see ; are they of any historical value?"

"Only incidentally," Ersilia said ; "they are family

papers, not very interesting in themselves, inventories and accounts, and memoranda for the most part, and some few letters ; but my uncle thought them so curious that he determined to have them transcribed and published with a French translation. He would not let them go out of his own hands, and undertook the work himself, with the assistance of an old German friend, who is very learned in such matters. I learned to read the writing easily, that I might help them ; but my uncle died before half the papers were gone through, and left the completion of the work to me."

"I cannot think how you learned to read the writing," said Humphrey, "it looks to me worse than a cuneiform inscription."

He had a sudden distinct vision of Ersilia in some dim library studying and poring over the old papers with the two old men, and as he looked at Mr. Fleming he seemed to see the same thought in his face.

"It is not really difficult," said Ersilia, "and I like learning almost anything. That is not my difficulty now. You see," she said, turning to Mr. Fleming, "these are written in ordinary Italian. But now and then in these letters that I am translating, I come upon words that are unknown to me, and as I cannot find them in my dictionaries, it has occurred to me that they may be provincial expressions proper to that part of the country. There is a letter here," selecting one and laying it before him, "written from Rome to some servant or steward ; I am almost sure that I have read the words correctly, and yet there are several that I do not understand."

"I must ask you to give me your copy," said Mr. Fleming, "I cannot make out this old handwriting as readily as you do, Madame." He read the paper through carefully. "You are right," he said then, "these are provincial expressions that a master, in writing orders to a country servant, would naturally make use of. If you would allow me, I believe I could translate this to your satisfaction."

"It would be doing me a great service," said Ersilia. "I have been feeling very helpless in trying to puzzle it

all out by myself. I was writing this morning to consult my uncle's old friend, Herr —, but he is dilatory about correspondence, and my letter might have remained unanswered for months. But there is no hurry," she added immediately, "and you must not trouble yourself with it while you are not well."

"On the contrary," he said, "I shall like the occupation, and if you will give me any of the papers you would like me to look over, I will begin at once. It is a pity though that they are not more amusing. I am sure you must get tired of copying endless inventories and accounts which are of very little interest in themselves."

"That is what I once said to Herr —," said Ersilia, smiling, "and he told me that I had the feminine incapacity for seeing the relation of parts to a whole, and that if I looked at these things rightly, I should understand that the price of a cow in the fourteenth or fifteenth century, is a link in the whole history of mankind. I admitted his argument, but I still find these papers rather dull."

Mr. Fleming took the manuscripts, and devoted his morning to their study. He had reached a turning point in his illness, and from that day recovered rapidly. Humphrey, no longer in close attendance upon him, resumed some of his former habits, and one afternoon, two or three days later, he went out to finish a sketch that he had begun before the commencement of the bad weather. On his return, he went straight to the salon, according to his usual custom to show his drawing to Ersilia. She was sitting in her old place on the sofa by the window, copying a manuscript that lay before her. Opposite, in Humphrey's own place at the little table, sat Mr. Fleming. The lad, with his portfolio in his hand, went up to them. Ersilia, absorbed in her work, did not see him at first, but in a moment she looked up, and with a passing glance and smile at Humphrey, turned to Mr. Fleming.

"I believe I need trouble you no more at present," she said, laying down her pen. "I am very much obliged

to you, Mr. Fleming. Through your kindness, I shall be able to do what I had almost despaired of doing—I shall be able to fulfil my uncle's wishes, and have these ready for publication in the autumn. He was very anxious that the work should be completed this year."

"If I can be of any further use, you must tell me," Mr. Fleming answered in the kind, courteous tones that gave a certain charm and distinction to his most commonplace words. "It gives me very great pleasure to be able to help you—"

Humphrey turned away. A strange feeling came into the lad's heart; he laid down his sketch-book without a word, and seated himself silently near Mademoiselle Mathilde, who, as usual, was nodding over her book, at the other end of the room. She roused herself up, however, at Humphrey's approach.

"That is right, Mr. Humphrey," she said, "come and talk to me. There is something sleepy in the air of this place, I think; tell me something amusing, something that will entertain me."

Humphrey was always good friends with Mademoiselle Mathilde. He used to laugh at her a little sometimes, but she was good-humored on the whole, and did not mind it. He had good manners, she was once pleased to tell Ersilia. "In the society of other young men," she said, "I perceive at once that they are thinking that I am old and ugly, that I wear a wig, and that they consider nobody over five-and-twenty worth speaking to. But with your cousin it is different. I do not even know whether he has discovered that I wear a wig or not. He treats me with the respect due to my age, and it pleases me."

Humphrey, to whom, as to all the world, Mademoiselle Mathilde's wig and rouge were sufficiently apparent, could not help laughing when these words were repeated to him. But these follies and vanities did not trouble him much. He liked the old lady, who was neither very wise nor always very amiable, for a certain sincerity and kindness of heart, that with all her faults made them-

selves felt, and he listened willingly enough whilst she went on talking.

"This place is getting extremely dull, now that every one is leaving," she said. "I shall be glad when I have finished my course of water-drinking (which has not done me the least good), and we can go on to the Eaux-Chaudes. Not that I expect to find it much livelier there. There is nothing so tiresome as staying in a place where one knows nobody. Even your being here has made a difference, Mr. Humphrey; and if your friend, your Mr. Fleming, if that is his name, had been a little more entertaining instead of falling ill the moment he arrived, and making us all more dismal than before—oh, you need not be alarmed, he is gone," as Humphrey turned round hastily, "and now I hope Ersilia will put away all those old papers that she knows I hate the very sight of. I entreated her to keep them out of my way, and I have seen nothing of them for a long time; but now they have all come out again."

Mr. Fleming had, in fact, left the room. Ersilia gathered her papers together, and came across to Mademoiselle Mathilde.

"I am sorry, Aunt Mathilde," she said, seating herself by the old lady, "but Mr. Fleming was good enough to help me, and you know my uncle——"

"Oh, you need not tell me about your uncle, my dear child. I knew him for nine-and-twenty years, and he was always the same. One day it would be a cart load of old papers, another a roomful of china, another busts or pictures—he never could do anything in moderation, he was always in extremes. Now, I have no objection to a few well-chosen pictures, a few good pieces of old china, and so on; it is the usual thing in good society; it promotes conversation, and creates a pleasant variety. But in my brother-in-law's house, the thing was overdone—quite overdone."

"But, Aunt Mathilde, it was what my uncle cared most about doing, and he only kept what was really beautiful and worth preserving. If there were not some

people who knew a great deal about such things, and who care for having them, everything that is old and beautiful would perish by degrees out of the world."

"That is so like you, Ersilia, you always have a reason for everything. It is a bad habit, my dear child; it fatigues one, and is useless; opinions are opinions, and quite distinct from reason. My opinion is that there should be moderation in everything. But you are like your uncle, Ersilia, you are always in extremes, and when you once get a notion into your head, you never get it out again. You have made up your mind never to go into society, and I suppose you never will."

"Dear Aunt Mathilde," said Ersilia, a little hurt, "I have promised to go out with you next winter in Paris, but in Rome it was different, you know."

"I know nothing of the sort," answered Mademoiselle Mathilde, "but I know it is simple waste for you to shut yourself up when you have a maid who can make dresses as your old Roberts can. You possess a treasure in her, a perfect treasure. As for my maid, Marie, she is a fool, an idiot, as I told her only this morning. She has not an idea in her head. I say to her, 'Marie, pay especial attention to that dress; I wish for one exactly like it, with such and such alterations, you understand.' She replies, 'Yes, Mademoiselle,' and produces the alterations, but nothing else. It is all alteration, absolutely different. The result is that I never have anything fit to put on, and one does not depend less upon one's toilette as one grows older. Not that I ever was a beauty," continued Mademoiselle Mathilde, frankly. "I am better looking now than I ever was in my life. Some people improve as they grow older; it is what you young people never will believe. You fancy youth and beauty always mean the same thing; but you are all wrong, Mr. Humphrey, although you look as if you did not believe it."

"I believe it implicitly, Mademoiselle," he answered, "it is a most consoling idea to me. I look forward with confidence to fifty years hence, by which time I may hope to have grown at least presentable."

"You are not so bad now," Mademoiselle Mathilde answered, nodding her head, "since you have cut your hair, and given up trying to look romantic, as you did when you first came here. If you would only put on a proper coat, instead of that old one that you insist upon wearing, you would do very well."

"You do not understand," said Humphrey. Ersilia had taken up his sketch, and was studying it while they talked, and the boy's momentary irritation, jealousy—he would have found it hard to give it a name—was gone. "Listen, Mademoiselle," he continued. "Since I have cut my hair short and given up romance, I have turned philosopher."

"Ah, yes, philosopher, we know what that means," answered Mademoiselle Mathilde, "you are young, Mr. Humphrey—very young."

Humphrey, who in fact wore an old coat, and was quite in earnest about it, never dreamed of having a serious argument with Mademoiselle Mathilde. But presently when she had left the room, he lingered before going to Mr. Fleming, to explain to Ersilia what he called the philosophy of the matter.

"It is not a mere question of pleasure or appearance," he said, and proceeded to unfold I know not which of those theories which are the salt of life to young and ardent spirits, and of which Humphrey had his head, at least, as full as any other lad of his age and position. Ersilia, who was also young and ardent, sat listening thoughtfully, as was her wont, while he talked.

"I always like your ideas, as you know, Humphrey," she said, "they seem to me very good and pure and unselfish. I never heard anyone talk before as you do, and I think it is noble to care so much about altering the wrong and selfish things that have gone on so long that we hardly think about them. But I am not sure that I should like to set to work just as you propose. Everyone is not young, and if you had lived as much with old people as I have, you would understand that they often like best to do what good they can in the world as it is,

without trying to make it different all at once. I think that, perhaps, when you are a little older yourself, you will modify your views."

The first part of this speech delighted Humphrey, but there was something in the last words that wounded him as if they had held some sting.

"You think my ideas worthy of respect," he said, "you acknowledge that they have force and purpose, and are not without originality, and yet you still speak to me as if I were a mere boy."

He spoke quietly; she did not guess from his tone that he was vexed, and answered playfully,

"Why, so you are a boy, Humphrey," she said, "I am not so very old yet, but I am three years older than you."

Randolph remembers yet the very tones in which she spoke the words, the very storm of passion that they raised in his heart. He remembers the scene, the hour. It had begun to rain again, and the dusk was falling. Ersilia had drawn her embroidery frame to one of the windows, and was stooping over it to catch the last moments of the quickly-fading light: Humphrey, standing at the other, was looking out on the drenched road and the splashing rain. In the room, as Ersilia ceased speaking, the only sound was the swift movement of her hand to and fro, the only brightness, the glimmer of her dress in the twilight. A sudden sense of darkness, of utter loneliness and sorrow came over the lad; the tears rushed to his eyes.

"I can see no more," Ersilia said, laying down her needle. "Humphrey, will you help me to move this frame back into its place?"

He came silently forward, and carried the frame to its corner near the door; she followed him to arrange her work; it was dark at this end of the room, and she could not see his face, which was full of gloom and trouble as he stood watching her at a little distance. All at once, with a sudden impulse, he made two steps forward. "If—if I am indeed such a boy," he began

with quivering lips, in a sort of choked voice, then stopped.

Ersilia was stooping down, engaged in covering up her work, and did not catch his words.

"What did you say, Humphrey?" she said, lifting up her head, and looking like some tall, dim, white flower, in the darkness.

"I must go to Mr. Fleming," he answered, and abruptly left the room.

But in the gallery he paused, leaning against one of the wooden pillars. The rain was pouring and dripping from a grey sky above, from grey eaves below, there was a cheerful clatter of plates and dishes in the distance, some one crossed the courtyard with a lantern ; the light, slanting upwards, flashed across Humphrey's face and startled him.

"By heaven, I am a man, and I will prove it yet!" he cried.

It was by such words that Ersilia had power to wound the lad's heart, full of passion and love, whilst she never guessed at the wound, which he still had fortitude enough to conceal.

CHAPTER VII.

At the Piano.

It had long been arranged that as soon as Mademoiselle Mathilde had finished her course of water-drinking, she and the Princess Zaraikine should go for a few weeks to the Eaux-Chaudes. Mr. Fleming's plans had been necessarily altered by his illness, and it came gradually to be understood that the whole party should make the same excursion at the same time. I think it was Mademoiselle Mathilde who first proposed the plan; she could not bear the idea, she said, of being deprived of the only society she had had for many weeks past.

"I should miss your coming in and out, Mr. Humphrey," she said, "and as for your Mr. Fleming, I was mistaken in him, and I am not ashamed to own it. I thought he was one of your moody, ill-bred Englishmen, but I was wrong. He is rather silent, and I never know what to say to him when we happen to be alone together; but he has good manners. I know what good manners are—no one better."

Mr. Fleming's manner always charmed women. Some one once said of him that his was a chivalrous soul born out of due time and robbed of its belief, and the words expressed sufficiently well that which gave an individual charm and refinement to a man who was not handsome, and who showed much indifference in the matter of tailors. Only, in his case, any such general belief would, I think, have been largely modified in any age by his particular views about women. To mere

beauty he was too much accustomed for it to affect him beyond a certain point, and though he looked upon plain women as imperfect creations, he was tolerant of them when they were cultivated and intelligent and could talk well. But a touch of commonness in mind or speech repelled him, and from obtrusive, loud-voiced women he absolutely fled. But I do not think they ever found it out, for he had an habitual gentleness and deference of manner which arose from great natural courtesy and kindness of heart, and which in a man whose powerful and delicate genius was known to all the world, could not fail to be flattering. Even Mademoiselle Mathilde, who had no sort of respect for genius—she was no philosopher, but she held the advanced view that genius is a malady of which the less there is in the world the better—even Mademoiselle Mathilde, as we have seen, was won over: though, I believe that Mr. Fleming had no very great liking for the old lady, and seldom said more to her than was demanded by the ordinary courtesies of life.

Humphrey, we may be sure, offered no opposition to this change in Mr. Fleming's plans. He asked for nothing better than to be near Ersilia, and if henceforward he found pain as well as delight in her society, if her unconscious kindness, her sweet indifference at once soothed and chilled him, it will be readily believed that he was not the least anxious on that account to linger on in the one presence that had power to transform the world for him. Perhaps, after it was finally settled that they should remain at Eaux-Bonnes, he thought that those old mountain walks with his cousin might be resumed, but if so he was disappointed. It happened then as it often does in life. People fall into some pleasant habit and fancy, perhaps, that it will last for ever. There comes a slight break of no importance they think; to-day it rains, but to-morrow it will be fine. But to-morrow it rains again, and the next day the relative position of things is altered; the charm is broken, and refuses to work again. Twice, indeed, Humphrey asked Ersilia

to join him in his walks, but on the first occasion she was busy with her manuscripts ; Mr. Fleming was giving her invaluable help, and she wished to devote the afternoon to her work. The second time she consented, but it did, in fact, begin to rain (for the weather was broken) and she could not go.

Humphrey did not mind the rain. A restless spirit was in the lad during those last days at Eaux-Bonnes. He took long walks by himself over the mountains, starting early, and returning late, wandering for hours amongst forests, and ravines, and upland pastures. They were wanderings that did him no good. To a mind preoccupied with its own selfish cares and anxieties, the voice of nature, like the voice of human brotherhood, is apt to be dumb, and Humphrey's self seemed continually to stretch before him as he walked, like some huge, darkening shadow that he could never overstep. Only afterwards, that sweet, changeful world of flying mists and clouds and peaks came back to him with a remembered accuracy of detail, where at the time he seemed to see nothing. What dull change had come over him? he sometimes wondered. Only a few weeks ago he had been looking forward to Mr. Fleming's arrival, longing with a lad's frank enthusiasm to make the two people he cared most for in the world known to each other, and now Why had he never learned Italian, he thought, with a sort of rage. Why could he not help Ersilia?

Some such thoughts as these were in his mind as, drenched and muddy, he returned home long after dark on the last evening of their stay at the Eaux-Bonnes. He dined alone, and then made his way to the salon, whose friendly lights he had seen shining through the grey as he crossed the Place an hour before. It already looked rather bare and deserted, for Mademoiselle Mathilde, who had a fancy for packing up everything three days beforehand, had swept away all her own and Ersilia's small properties. But there were some big logs burning on the open hearth, and the three people gathered

round them looked so quietly at home, that Humphrey had an odd momentary feeling of being an intruder as he walked up to the little circle. Ersilia was reading aloud : she had done so once or twice before when they had all been together in the evening. She read well, and liked doing it, she said, for she had been accustomed to read to the Princess Zaraikine, her mother-in-law, and to her uncle, whose sight had failed very much during the last year of his life. She closed the book, however, as Humphrey came in, and looked up with her kind smile of welcome.

"How cold you look, Humphrey," she said, rising to make room for him by the fire. "Let me give you some tea. Where have you been?"

"I don't know exactly," he answered, shivering and warming himself. "To the top of a mountain, I think ; but I lost my way in the mist, and I hardly know where I went or how I got home again. I saw a curious effect about sunset," he went on. "I wish you had been there ; in twenty years one might not see the same thing again. The clouds parted for about a minute, and showed a number of peaks high up in a clear sky, with a red glow on them and the full moon above. Where the peaks are now I cannot say ; when I saw them they were several thousand miles off."

"I know," said Ersilia, with a sudden light in her eyes. She gave Humphrey some tea, and went back to her seat at the table, where Mr. Fleming was drawing by the light of the shaded lamp.

"Several thousand miles," cried Mademoiselle Mathilde ; "what are you talking about, Mr. Humphrey, and what makes you so late this evening? I am glad you have come back at last, for you must positively learn to play patience to-night. I have kept out the cards on purpose. Who knows? at Eaux-Chaudes we may have neither room, nor table, nor anything else that is suitable."

"I would learn with pleasure, Mademoiselle," answered Humphrey, trying to excuse himself as he had

often done before, "but I am so stupid, and if we have music it will distract me."

"Not at all—you are not at all stupid," answered Mademoiselle Mathilde; "and as for the music, you must pay no attention to it. It used to distract me, but I never even hear it now. So you can play if you like, Ersilia."

"You will give us some music, will you not?" said Mr. Fleming, looking up from his drawing. "Your playing is a new delight to me; I never heard any quite like it before. Other people play with their fingers and their minds; but with you the music seems also to come straight from your imagination, as if you were improvising as you go on."

"That is strange," answered Ersilia, "for I cannot improvise at all. That gift of music living like a language in people's minds to express their thoughts has always seemed an unknown sense to me. And I am really ignorant altogether about music—I know nothing of the science. I should like to understand it as you do, Mr. Fleming, to be able to disentangle the parts of a symphony, and know why each note is in its place. It must be like following the great thoughts of a master as they arise in his mind."

"I am not sure that it would add as much to your enjoyment as you think," answered Mr. Fleming, rising and going to open the piano, "the science is delightful in itself, but I am content sometimes to forget it, that I may enjoy the mere sensation of perfect sound."

"Do you mean that you prefer the feeling to the thought?" said Ersilia doubtfully, "perhaps I should also if, like you, I had a background of knowledge to fall back upon. But that is always my difficulty; I care about so many things, and I seem to know them all through feeling instead of through real knowledge."

"I mean," said Mr. Fleming, answering her indirectly, "that the sort of feeling you have is better than a good deal of the knowledge people get hold of. Half of what they take a great deal of trouble to learn, only justifies what some minds can grasp by intuition."

"But that is just what I should like," said Ersilia. "I should like what I feel about things to be justified by facts. It is the same with painting as with music. I should like to study anatomy and composition, so as to have a real understanding of the pictures I have learned to care for. You know," she went on, "I cannot do things, Humphrey," laughing a little at the lad, who had followed them to light the candles, "Humphrey cannot forgive my stupidity. He cannot think how anyone can be so dull as to neither paint pictures nor compose sonatas. But I think I always care more about knowing than doing; if one can appreciate the works of others, one's enjoyment is quite limitless."

"You are right," said Mr. Fleming, "you are happier so." He sat down on the music-stool, and began to play softly, looking at Ersilia, who was not looking at him, but who sat thinking in the low chair by the piano, leaning a little forward, her cheek resting on her folded hands.

"It is not a question of personal happiness," she said at last, without moving, "nothing is so splendid as real creative genius; one cannot be quite content to be without that which one reverences so highly in others. Besides, there are times when one feels——" she broke off, then began again abruptly, as if uttering her thoughts as they came into her mind. "I have known of artists at Rome," she said, "who spend their lives in efforts that never lead them beyond a certain point. I suppose they are right to follow their strongest instinct and highest aim, but that impulse to create without the power of creation always seems to me a very melancholy one. I have sometimes thought that to lose one's self in a higher life than one's own, would be the best and noblest; one can partly do that through understanding the great minds of all ages. I would rather do that than feel myself bound to spend my life in working out my own smaller thoughts."

"It is for minds such as yours that workers live," said Mr. Fleming, rising and giving her his place at the piano.

Then in a different tone, "Did you know many people at Rome?" he said.

"No, very few," she answered. "I have known very few people all my life. What would you like me to play, Mr. Fleming?"

"Everything," he said, "I don't know whether we shall be without a table at the Eaux-Chaudes, as Mademoiselle Mathilde fears, but it is very possible there may be no piano."

"That will be a pity," said Ersilia smiling, "for I think I always play my best to you. There are one or two people to whom I cannot play at all; I know that they are out of sympathy with the music, and that takes all the meaning out of the notes for me also."

Humphrey, held captive at the card-table by Mademoiselle Mathilde, looked more than once across the room to where, round Mr. Fleming and Ersilia, two wax candles made a circle of light. They shone on the polished floor, on the open music-book, resting against the faded red silk back of the piano, and on the subtle harmonies of color where the tender whiteness of Ersilia's hand met the yellowing ivory of the keys, the yellow whiteness of the lace ruffles round her slender wrist. From where Humphrey sat he could not see her face, but he could watch the motion of her fingers, whose touch, at once strong and delicate, seemed to have power to awaken long slumbering tones of sweetness and passion in the worn notes. As Humphrey sat listening and dealing out kings, and queens, and aces under Mademoiselle Mathilde's direction, he remembered how once, before Mr. Fleming's arrival, he had asked Ersilia to teach him some piece of music, and how they in like manner, had spent an evening together at the piano—

"What are you doing, Monsieur Humphrey?" cried Mademoiselle Mathilde. "That is all wrong, I do not believe you have attended to one word I have been saying. Have you any idea of the first principles of the game?"

"Certainly, Mademoiselle," answered Humphrey,

"when you think you ought to move a card, do not touch it; keep it till it is of no use—I mean till it is of more use."

He answered at random, for he was looking at Ersilia again. She had left off playing, but she still sat at the piano, listening while Mr. Fleming talked. At the moment that Humphrey looked up, she turned her head to speak, and then he could see her face lighted up and over-spread with a sudden momentary blush that faded almost as it came. Ersilia did not often blush, and perhaps it was the transient glow on her pale cheeks that recalled to Humphrey his sunset view; but he felt all at once that had the mists parted once more to reveal Ersilia and Mr. Fleming wandering together beneath the moon in that clear red twilight land, he could not have received a stronger impression of their being alone together in some far-off, separate world.

It was only a moment's vision. It passed as Ersilia rose from the piano and came towards the card table.

"Do play one piece more," said Humphrey, getting up too, and pushing the cards away, "I have not been able to listen to you properly, and perhaps, as Mr. Fleming says, we may have no piano at the Eaux-Chaudes."

She went back to the piano at once, hesitated for a moment, and then flushing up again, began to play one of Chopin's Polonaises. They all sat listening, silent even when it was finished, for the wild, hurrying, pathetic music smote their hearts with something at once of exultation, and mournfulness, and pleading. As Randolph recalls it now, it seems to him that no fitter ending to their last evening at the Eaux-Bonnes could have been found.

They all left the next day, Mademoiselle Mathilde and the Princess Zاراikine in a carriage, Humphrey and Mr. Fleming on horseback. As they passed down the street, Humphrey turned and looked once more at the little village lying in the afternoon sunlight, at the white hotel, the green mountains, the lingering groups of idlers,

all that had made the background to his life in these weeks that were gone. He has never seen it since. Once indeed, years afterwards, he visited it again, but it was in the late autumn ; the hotels were empty and shattered, the place was deserted, and the first snow of the season lay lightly upon the ground.

CHAPTER VIII.

Enter Charlotte.

A NARROW gorge leading straight into the heart of the mountains, opens abruptly from the wider valley that slopes downward to the plain. Where the road, hewn from rocky precipices, widens to a ledge overhanging the torrent, cluster the few houses of the Eaux-Chaudes. The sound of the waters fills the air, great mountain cliffs rise on every side, peaks beyond peaks close in the view. Above the village the gorge narrows again, a cascade comes leaping down out of the mountain side, a bridge crosses the torrent, and the road following the other bank of the stream leads onwards through wild passes into Spain.

"I like this better than the Eaux-Bonnes, don't you, Sir?" said Humphrey to Mr. Fleming, "I think even the air feels fresher here; there is no atmosphere of Paris finery." He was leaning out of an upper window as he spoke, looking down upon the one narrow street of the little village. It had been raining, and through the grey mist flocks and herds with tinkling bells were being led down from the mountain pastures; three dirty Spaniards sat playing cards upon a low stone wall; the curé stood looking up at the clouds and chatting to Humphrey's host, the postmaster. Just opposite, a few steps led down to the little platform where the hotel stood on the edge of the steep bank above the torrent. They had written beforehand to secure apartments, but some mistake had arisen; there was not room for all the party, and Humphrey, by the advice of the landlady, who was in

despair at the misunderstanding, had taken a bed-room at the post office. It was to be for a night or two only, he was told; but the lad took a fancy to his quarters where he had more independence, and more space for his sketch-books and portfolios, and other miscellaneous property; and though he always breakfasted and dined at the hotel, he kept on his first apartment to the end of his stay.

Behind his room, another smaller one led through a glass door to a wooden gallery running nearly the length of the house, and looking upon the green mountain side which rose immediately behind. Randolph has more than one sketch taken from this gallery, of the one or two white cottages scattered on the slope, of the precipices above, the purple peaks rising behind. As he looks at them now they recall to him the freshness, the sweetness, the gayety even of those days at the Eaux-Chaudes. In that little village, high up in its narrow gorge, life seemed simpler and freer than at the Eaux-Bonnes, and the change did the lad good in a way. He tried to shake off the dull wayward mood that had been creeping over him, to forget the nameless trouble (he would not name it to himself) that oppressed him. Ersilia was there, from hour to hour he could still see her, talk to her—he would not count the hours as they went; he shut his eyes to the end they might bring. He climbed the mountains, he rambled with his master through the wild and sweet land, twenty times a day he went backwards and forwards to and from the hotel; once, he gave a tea-party in his little gallery-room, when Charlotte poured out the tea, and it was Ersilia who cut the bread-and-butter—but I am anticipating; I have yet to tell of Charlotte's arrival.

It was on the afternoon of the third or fourth day of their stay at the Eaux-Chaudes, that Humphrey, who was mounting some sketches in his own room, saw an open carriage drive up to the door of the hotel, and a party of travellers descend—a French maid, two flapping straw hats and grey frocks, and a tall lady, who, after a shrill altercation with the driver, disappeared, sweeping her

party before her within the dark interior, leaving the man shrugging his shoulder and turning his money over and over in his hand. That same evening at the *table-d'hôte*, there were three places laid for these new-comers, but it was not till dinner was nearly half over that a sound of footsteps and rustling dresses outside the door announced their arrival. The tall lady, a very elegant and gracious person with sandy hair, a lace cap, and a high aristocratic nose, came first. She was followed by a little girl of eleven or twelve, who had also a high nose and sandy hair, and who was nicely dressed in a white starched muslin frock with a broad sash ; and then after a moment's pause, in a tumbled little grey frock, shyly and hurriedly, conscious of being late, came a slender little maiden of seventeen or so, with soft dark eyes, and soft yellow hair, shining as floss-silk, and like floss-silk with a tendency to fly out and entangle itself with every breath of air.

The lady who spoke French and English alternately and with equal facility, took her place at the table, with much talking and arranging of her violet silk flounces.

"Are these the only places left for us?" she said, "then be so good as to shut that window. I never sit in a draught; it is a rule that I have been obliged to lay down in travelling. You had better go opposite, Charlotte," this to the little grey maiden, "and Rose can sit by me. No—no soup, thank you. I never eat soup in hot weather. The water, Charlotte, and hold up your—Why, Mr. Fleming, what a delightful, what an unexpected pleasure! I have been looking for you everywhere in the Pyrenees, and had given up all hopes of seeing you. Where have you been all this time?"

"Not quite everywhere," Mr. Fleming answered in his most courteous tones; "at the Eaux-Bonnes for the greater part of the time. How are you, Miss Grey?" shaking hands with Charlotte. She sat next to him, and opposite her-aunt, who occupied the end seat on the other side of the table, with her daughter Rose between herself and Humphrey.

"We, I think, have been everywhere," Mrs. Grey went

on, "to Bagnères, Luchon, Cauterets, Gavarni; and I am delighted—quite delighted with the country. There is something so—so original about it all. It is singular that Switzerland, which is also a mountainous country, should be so very different from the Pyrenees; but so it is. I do so envy you the privilege—what is this? Izzard? no—no izzard, thank you—I do so envy you the power of transferring these beautiful scenes to paper, Mr. Fleming. I quite long to see some more of your delightful sketches. Have you been drawing a great deal?"

"Hardly at all," he answered, "and if you want to see sketches, Mrs. Grey, you must let me introduce you to Mr. Randolph; he has been hard at work." Then turning to his shy little neighbor, "How do you like the mountains, Miss Grey?" he said.

"Oh, indeed!" was Mrs. Grey's answer. She scanned Humphrey with a look in her hard, light grey eyes, which seemed to say this was not at all the same thing. "Are you fond of sketching too, then?" she inquired.

"It is my business," Humphrey answered bluntly, feeling by no means flattered, and not at all pleased by having this stream of eloquence turned upon him. But it was exhausted, or Mrs. Grey, perhaps, considered him unworthy to receive it, for with the exception of an occasional remark to her little daughter, she said no more.

There was a fashion in this primitive little place, where everyone seemed to live out of doors, of lingering outside the hotel door on fine evenings, looking over the low stone parapet at the torrent foaming below, watching the light fade and the gorge fill with darkness, while the stars came out above the mountain-tops. The shadows fell early at the Eaux-Chaudes; neither sunrise nor sunset could be seen there; but sometimes, as the day declined, the strip of blue sky overhead flushed with a sudden glow, soft pink clouds floated along, down in the narrow street a dreamy reflected light seemed all at once to suffuse with a new sentiment the groups chattering at the open doors, the children springing up and down the steps, the

mountain-girls walking swiftly along, with many-plaited skirts and folded capulets ; voices chimed and harmonized as though heard from afar. "The sun is setting somewhere," we would say, with a thought flying, perhaps, to sails reddening on distant horizons, to reapers in wide harvest-fields binding their sheaves in the ruddy glow, to city towers and spires flaming on far misty plains——

This evening Mr. Fleming and Humphrey, coming out as usual, found Mademoiselle Mathilde and Ersilia, who had not dined at the *table d'hôte*, already seated with some books and work on a bench under a tree. Ersilia came forward to meet them, and Mrs. Grey, who had fastened on to Mr. Fleming as he left the dining-room, drew him aside at once.

"Who is that?" she could be heard saying quite audibly. "The Princess Zaraikine? Zaraikine—I don't remember the name. Whose daughter do you say she is? M. de Florian's? What, M. de Florian, at Rome? Oh, his niece—yes, yes, exactly; now I remember all about it—yes. You must introduce me, Mr. Fleming, you must indeed. I might almost venture to introduce myself." Mrs. Grey went on almost immediately, as she came up to the Princess Zaraikine. "Your uncle, M. de Florian, was so well known to me for so many years, that I can hardly look upon you as a stranger."

"I am always glad to meet any one who knew my uncle," answered Ersilia, surprised, but with simple cordiality.

"I can hardly say that I myself knew M. de Florian—not personally," said Mrs. Grey; "I never saw him, but I used to hear so much of him from a dear, a very dear and old friend of mine. She also was a collector of antiquities, of gems, and statues, and—and antiquities in short; a very distinguished connoisseur. 'If dear M. de Florian and I were not such friends,' she used to say to me, 'we should be bitter enemies. We always want the same thing. I have the greatest respect for his judgment, but I flatter myself'—her way of talking was rather peculiar, dear old lady—I flatter myself that I have a

slight superiority, a feminine superiority, in matters of taste."

"Will you not come to the bridge?" said Humphrey, suddenly turning to Ersilia; "there is a light on the mountains that will be worth seeing from there, but it will be gone in a few minutes."

"I will come," she answered. "You are speaking of old Lady Caroline G——, who died in Rome a year or two ago, are you not?" she said to Mrs. Grey. "I never saw her but once; but I have often heard my uncle speak of her, and Mademoiselle de Brisac knew her very well. Aunt Mathilde, you remember Lady Caroline G——?"

"Whom on earth was Mrs. Grey talking about?" Humphrey could not help asking, as Ersilia walked away at his side.

"Of an old Irish lady who used to come to Rome every winter," she answered, smiling. "She made collections of all sorts of things, as Mrs. Grey says; but I think her friendship with my uncle was partly imaginary. He rather avoided her. He used to say that she would buy any rubbish that the dealers offered her, and then be very angry with him for not taking it off her hands."

They were walking quickly along the village street as they talked, but by the time they arrived at the bridge the light was already fading. In front, a soft white cloud was drawn across the mountains, dark peaks appeared above; behind and higher up some bright, orange-red clouds were still floating. The fresh scent of the box trees was in the air, and a wind was stirring here and there, ruffling Ersilia's hair as she stood with uncovered head silently leaning against the parapet of the bridge: the darkness behind her, all the light from the sky on her face.

There was a sound of approaching footsteps. Ersilia did not move; but Humphrey turned round and saw Mr. Fleming and Charlotte Grey coming towards them.

"I have brought Miss Grey to see the cascade," Mr. Fleming said; "will you take her up there, Humphrey, before it is too dark?"

"It is rather dark already, I am afraid," he answered, but he led the way up a little winding path to the right. Charlotte followed dutifully ; but it was dusk amongst the trees and bushes, and I do not know that she much enjoyed the expedition as she slipped and stumbled over the stones. They paused at the best point of view, and Humphrey, who was always fascinated by the ceaseless rush and dash of the water, stood staring down into the depths with his companion at his side ; but presently turning round, he met a wide-eyed, half-frightened gaze, so like that of a child, that he could not help smiling. Charlotte did not smile in return. Her lips began to pout, her eyes filled with tears ; but there was apparently something in the lad's face that encouraged her, for she came closer to him, and said piteously :—

"I have lost the key of my box, and I can't get any of my things out. Do you think there is any one here who could open it for me ? "

"Plenty of people, I should think," answered Humphrey, at once amused and touched by this artless confidence. "Have you asked any one at the hotel ? "

"Aunt Maria told me that in a little wild place like this there would be no chance of finding a locksmith," said Charlotte, half sobbing ; "so that she would have to go away directly, and that I had spoilt all her and Rose's pleasure. I—I never meant to. I wish we had never come to the Pyrenees ! "

CHAPTER IX.

Charlotte's Troubles.

MRS. GREY relented apparently towards her niece, and consented that her box should be opened, for Charlotte appeared brilliant the next day in a white frock, with blue ribbons in her yellow hair, and Mrs. Grey herself announced that she considered the Eaux-Chaudes to be the most charming place she had yet seen in her travels, and that she intended to prolong her stay there indefinitely.

"If there were no other inducement," she said, "that of finding myself amongst so many friends in the midst of these charming scenes would, in itself, be sufficient. Dear Mademoiselle De Brisac, I trust you will allow me to look upon you as something beyond a mere acquaintance, you who have known so many of those most dear to me."

Mademoiselle Mathilde was quite willing to receive Mrs. Grey as a friend. The old lady's instincts (which to do her justice, were generally true enough) somewhat failed her here. She pronounced Mrs. Grey to be a very delightful and distinguished person, highly connected, and evidently accustomed to move in the best society. Before two days were over, she had somehow found out all about her—that she had a brother who was a baronet with large estates in ——shire, that her husband had been in the Austrian embassy, and had died about five years before in Vienna, that Charlotte was his orphan niece whom he had adopted, and who would some day have a large fortune of her own—all this, I say, Mademoiselle Mathilde had found out before two days were over. She and Mrs. Grey discovered I don't know how

many friends in common, besides Lady Caroline G——. Humphrey used to see them sitting with their heads together on the bench outside the hotel door, and their conversation, no doubt, was sufficiently edifying, if not sufficiently witty, to be worthy of a place in a volume of French memoirs.

Mademoiselle Mathilde, however, was the only one of the party in whose eyes Mrs. Grey found favor. To Humphrey, indeed, she became much more gracious after the first day. "I had no idea," she said to him, "that you were the cousin of the Princess Zaraikine, and the young artist, some of whose works I so much admired in Paris. We must be friends, Mr. Randolph; I adore the works of genius. Had I the means, my hall should be covered with them; but as it is, I am obliged to content myself with one or two gems that I am fortunate enough to possess. A Sir Joshua, a Gainsborough, two Romneys; the best judges have pronounced them to be real treasures. When we return to Paris, where I propose spending the winter, I shall be delighted to show them to you. I shall often see you at my house, I trust; I delight in gathering round me the—the rising genius of the day, all that is most distinguished in painting, in music, in poetry."

"You are very good," answered Humphrey, feeling somewhat mollified, but a good deal bored. Mr. Fleming, who had known Mrs. Grey in Paris, as he knew half the fashionable world who visited his studio, laughed when Humphrey repeated to him this little conversation.

"You are caught, my boy," he said, "you will have to go. Mrs. Grey has left off asking me, but young fellows like you musn't give themselves airs. I thought you would soon hear of her pictures; I know them well; they are family portraits and very good ones. She calls one of them a Gainsborough; it is no such thing but a good picture, nevertheless. She carries them about with her everywhere. 'These are my passports to the world of art,' she says. I wish you would change places with me at the *table-d'hôte*, Humphrey. I can't stand

sitting opposite to her any longer ; she oppresses me—I hate to see her withering up that poor little niece of hers with stony glances. I ate no dinner at all yesterday.”

Humphrey laughed and agreed willingly enough. He did not mind Mrs. Grey and her stony glances, and he thought it would be pleasant to sit by the little niece, who was soft and gentle and pretty, and who blushed when she was spoken to.

“What have you been doing to-day, Miss Grey ?” he said, as she took her seat by him at dinner that evening, “you have been on some excursion, of course, everyone makes excursions here ; besides, I saw you and your cousin come riding on donkeys down the street. I see everything from my window at the post-office, you know ; all the sheep, and the goats, and the shepherds, and the donkeys, and the Spaniards. I saw a fat Spanish lady on a mule ride up to the door of the hotel to-day. They couldn’t take her in, so she was obliged to go further on, and presently two wicked-looking men in sashes and broad hats, like brigands, came riding after her. Perhaps they meant to rob and murder her in the loneliest part of the gorge ; she looked as if she might have a good-sized money-bag amongst her packages.”

“Oh, do you think so ?” said Charlotte faltering, then seeing that Humphrey was laughing, she began to laugh too. “We went to the Grotto to-day,” she said, “it is very pretty there in the forest, there was a hut with charcoal-burners, only I slipped off my——”

“The salt, Charlotte,” said Mrs. Grey, suddenly. There was a salt-cellar close to her, but her words had the desired effect of making Charlotte jump, and of reminding her that her aunt’s eyes were upon her ; nor could she be prevailed on to say another word during the remainder of dinner.

Charlotte confided no more of her woes to Humphrey, but he was not long in discovering that she had other and even worse troubles, perhaps, than that of the loss of her keys. The very next day, as he and Mr. Fleming were walking up one of the little, steep, zig-zag paths

cut amongst the trees on either side of the gorge, they came suddenly upon a bench set in an angle and a crumpled-up little figure sitting on it, crying bitterly, with her yellow hair all blown across her face. She looked up, startled by the sound of footsteps, and hastily crushed an open letter into her pocket, but her flow of tears was too impetuous to be stopped at once, and she could only turn away her head, and try to stifle her sobs by burying her face in her handkerchief.

Her distress was so evident, and the two had come so suddenly upon her, that they stopped involuntarily. But in the same moment, Charlotte recovering her presence of mind, sprang up and fled away down the narrow pathway, leaving Mr. Fleming and Humphrey to look after her with genuine pity.

"How wrong of us to come and disturb her," said Mr. Fleming. "What can her trouble be, I wonder? It is so sad to see a child cry like that. Perhaps that aunt of hers has been bullying her again. I believe women have ways of tormenting each other that we know nothing about, Humphrey. I have seen that little girl wince and color at some side hit that I failed to understand; and she is a nice, pretty little girl, too. Speak to your cousin about her, Humphrey; ask her to befriend her."

Humphrey did speak to Ersilia, and after this Charlotte was often in the Princess Zaraikine's salon, where, according to our old custom at the Eaux-Bonnes, we sometimes met in the evening. After the *table d'hôte*, a little figure was almost always to be seen lingering for a moment on the lower step of the staircase. Sometimes, when a shrill voice came sounding from above, "Charlotte, where is Charlotte? What are you doing down there!" the girl would start and run. But more often Ersilia would say, "Can you spend the evening with us, Charlotte?" Then an upper door would close with a bang, and Charlotte, springing joyfully from step to step, would accompany the Princess Zaraikine up stairs. In two days the girl had learned to cling to Ersilia, whose own past experience of loneliness had its chief outward expression

in an indescribable tenderness for all lonely and suffering things.

But, indeed, we all liked little Charlotte. There was something gentle, tender, confiding about the child that won our hearts, and it seemed hard that a simple little soul that demanded only a little warmth of affection to unfold as naturally as a flower opens in the sunshine, should be closed up by the chill influence of a hard, unkindly woman. It was not a great deal that she demanded. One might have travelled all over that little heart, and found in it no very profound depths; but neither would one have found one harsh, or arrogant, or grudging thought; and if it was but a dim little world in which she moved, bounded by the horizon of her own cares, and loves, and sorrows, those loves and sorrows were very pure and unselfish. She was seventeen, and yet she was more of a child than her cousin, Miss Rose, who held up her head primly when her elders spoke to her, who discussed the latest *modes* with her mamma, and criticised the visitors at the *table d'hôte*. This young person exhibited a strict propriety in all her words and movements. She was seldom seen to run, or jump, or climb; but she took daily exercise up and down in front of the hotel, with her grey stuff toes turned out, and a white parasol over her wide straw hat; she had brought big books with her to continue her studies during her travels, and was altogether a very good and conscientious little girl. Charlotte also made heroic efforts to be good, as I believe she would have called it; but, somehow, her collars never would sit straight, her pretty hair would come tumbling down, she turned shuddering from the big books, and once confessed, blushing and laughing, that only a year ago she had taken possession of a big doll that Rose had thrown away, and hiding it away in her own room, had amused herself with making clothes for it. Everyone laughed at this confession, and Humphrey inquired whether she had the doll with her at the Eaux-Chaudes. "No," she said, shaking her head; "it was a year ago, and she did not care for such things now." A

sad look came into her face, her eyes filled with tears, and she was silent as she sat on a low stool, leaning her head against Ersilia's knee.

What were Charlotte's troubles? That they were not wholly occasioned by her aunt was evident, for even when with us her tears were almost as ready as her smiles; and what appeared a mere trifle was sometimes enough to send this little April maiden into one of her sudden fits of weeping. Thus, on this same evening, Humphrey began lamenting, as he often did, that there was no piano in the room. "We have no music at all now," he said. "I wish some one could sing—cannot you, Miss Grey?"

"I can if you like," Charlotte answered, rather to his surprise. She sat up, and, without preface, began a little German Volkslied—she knew German very well, having lived in her childhood in Vienna. It was a wild and simple air, and her voice was sweet, and clear, and fresh as a child's—like a child's, too, in that touch of pathos that comes from the very absence of expression. But towards the end of the third verse she all at once faltered and broke down, and whilst the rest were applauding, she gave a sob, flung her arms around Ersilia's neck, and then slipped out of the room. Ersilia sat still for a moment, then rose and followed her.

"That girl is a complete goose," said Mademoiselle Mathilde, who alone regarded Charlotte with some disfavor; "she does nothing but cry and laugh, and has no more notion of dressing herself than a baby. Every young person," she continued severely, addressing her remarks to Mr. Fleming and Humphrey, "ought to know how to tie a bow and stick in a pin. That little Charlotte is never fit to be seen; her gowns are tumbled the moment she looks at them. But it is the way with half the English girls one meets; they have no idea of how to put on their clothes. Who ever saw a French girl with her collar crumpled as soon as it is on, and her hair flying in every direction at once? The excellent Mrs. Grey has had a world of trouble with that girl, and can make

nothing of her. She has told me all about it ; she speaks of her with the greatest affection, and continually laments her perversity."

Who knows ? Mrs. Grey very probably thought herself right in her estimate of Charlotte. She naturally looked upon her niece from the point of view that most affected herself ; for nothing but a rare generosity and clearness of vision will enable us to judge of those connected with us with reference, not to our own natures, but to theirs, and I do not know that Mrs. Grey was especially endowed with either of those qualities. She can have had little in common with that simple, idle, loving little heart, and I daresay thought the girl wilful and perverse, when she was only frightened out of all presence of mind. Others, who loved Charlotte for herself, could judge her more kindly both then and afterwards.

Ersilia presently came back alone. She took up her work again, but her hands trembled, and in a minute she let it drop.

"Poor little Charlotte, poor little girl !" she said at last, as if she could not help it, and sat leaning forward with a loving look in her eyes, as though Charlotte had been still before her.

Mademoiselle Mathilde had left the room, and no one answered for a moment. In the silence, the frightened cry of a child was heard in the road below. Ersilia started at the sound as though in sudden pain.

"I think there is no end to it," she said, clasping and unclasping her hands tightly once or twice.

Mr. Fleming came round from his seat at the other side of the table and stood opposite to her, leaning on the back of the arm-chair that Mademoiselle Mathilde had quitted.

"No end to what ?" he said.

"To this—this hurtling of the world, this clashing of hard pain and wrong-doing with things that are too weak and young to understand or meet them. With older people it is different ; they have—they ought to have courage and endurance. But it is so hard to see a child

hurt or grieved ; it does not know what it means—or people feeble with age. I once saw an old man weep, and I understood then what is meant by the tragedies of life.”

Her own tears, her rare tears came to her eyes at the recollection. She started up and began to pace the room. She was not thinking of herself, but it was from her own past experience that she was speaking. In a moment she began again.

“There is little Charlotte—I think no more guileless, innocent soul ever lived, a creature so weak and tender, too, that one would like to make a sunny place in life for her to move in, as one sets a child on a sunny lawn to play with the daisies. She is only a child, and yet—”

She broke off abruptly, and paused in her walk. There was a window in the room, that opened immediately above the torrent ; the night was warm, and it was open now. The moonlight streamed on the mountain-cliff opposite, making it look like veined marble ; the waters foamed white below ; in the stillness of the night their sound was like confused voices mingled with thunder echoing from the mountains. Perhaps it suggested Ersilia's next words.

“I have sometimes thought,” she said, coming back to her seat and speaking more calmly, “how it would be if we were all at once able to hear all the cries of pain and sorrow that are being uttered round us—how dreadfully they would fill the air ; still more if we could hear those that are not uttered. It is a thought that comes across me sometimes when I feel happy, just as a very lovely day makes me feel that somewhere in the world there are grey skies and pouring rain.”

“Surely that is morbid,” said Mr. Fleming, “and, forgive me, such feelings do not seem to belong to you of right. I can no more associate them with you than I can think of the rainy days you speak of, on one of these golden mornings here. I am happy, and thankful for the happiness.”

“I know one forgets,” said Ersilia, too much in ear-

nest not to answer his words directly. "I am happy too—I cannot help it. But I do not think that my feeling, when it comes, is morbid ; I am sure, at least, that it would not be, if I could act upon it. There is one person," she said, "who always comes to my mind when I think of care and trouble; with her, feeling always passes at once into action, and her life is one of the most harmonious that I know."

"Who is that?" said Mr. Fleming.

"It is a Mrs. Sidney—I should like to tell you about her, Mr. Fleming," said Ersilia, with the sweet look of confidence that comes from the certainty of sympathy with the speaker, if not with the words. "She has been my friend ever since I was a child. She is older than I am, but we were at school in Paris together, and we married about the same time. Within three years of her marriage, she lost both her husband and child, and was left almost alone in the world. She was quite heartbroken for a time, but she has told me that it came upon her one day like a revelation, that her own sorrow had interpreted to her what she never could understand before, the great sorrow of the world. I daresay most people have had the same sort of feeling, but there are few, I think, who act upon it as she has done. She had no family ties, and she gave up all her old habits and associations to go and live as a poor woman amongst poor people, that she might learn to know them and their wants better."

"I can understand your admiring that," said Mr. Fleming, "it is very fine. But she must have a genius for that particular sort of goodness—it is a gift like any other."

"With her, it is a gift of love, I think," Ersilia answered. "I never knew anyone so possessed with the love of her fellow-creatures. She is not what is generally called clever, but she has a sort of wisdom that I cannot describe ; she has gained great influence over the people with whom she lives, and she uses it in the best and calmest manner. Yes, you are right, Mr. Fleming, she has a genius for goodness, and her life satisfies her."

"It is not a life that would satisfy you," he said.

"No," answered Ersilia, "It would not satisfy me—"

"You would like—" began Humphrey, after a minute's pause.

"I should like so many things, Humphrey," she said, rising, as Mademoiselle Mathilde came into the room, "why is life so rich and so beautiful, and so endlessly sad, but that we may go on longing amidst its contradictions?" And then Mademoiselle Mathilde, who was a punctual person, sent them off to bed, as it was her habit to do at half-past ten every night.

CHAPTER X.

A Tea Party.

It was about this time that Humphrey gave the tea-party of which mention has already been made. He made great preparations for it, and the kindly people of the house did their best to assist him. There were flowers to brighten the dim little gallery room ; a big iron pot boiled and simmered amongst the logs on the wide hearth, a tea-pot had been found somewhere, and an odd assortment of cups and saucers ; there was a pile of wild raspberries and a great mass of white, new-pressed curd to eat with them. It was for the afternoon, whilst the sun still streamed brightly on the green mountain slope outside, that the party was arranged, and everyone came. Mrs. Grey set her chair in the glass-door that led on to the old wooden gallery, and declared herself charmed with everything.

"I delight in these *al fresco* entertainments," she said, "one may almost call this *al fresco*, Mr. Randolph, with these fresh breezes blowing in, and that lovely view before us. I have sometimes thought that of all the ages of the world, that of Boccaccio is the one I should have chosen to live in—Boccaccio or Watteau—I am not sure that I should not have preferred Watteau. There is something in the pastoral scenes he represents that always fascinates me."

Ersilia, as I have said, cut the bread-and-butter on this occasion. I am not sure that Charlotte's little fingers would have had the necessary strength and skill, but Humphrey, who wanted to do the girl honor, asked her

to pour out the tea. I am afraid that under her aunt's eyes it was an honor that she did not greatly appreciate. She went on pretty well, however, for a time ; but presently in a rash moment, when no one was looking, she lifted the iron pot from the fire and filled the tea-pot to overflowing, with disastrous results to the second cups.

"There is something very odd about this tea," said Mrs. Grey, casting her eyes up to the ceiling and speaking to no one in particular, whilst poor Charlotte got redder and redder behind her tea-pot.

"I apologize a thousand times," cried Humphrey, rushing to the rescue, "I am afraid this French stuff is not very good, and I did not put in nearly enough to begin with, but we will soon set that to rights," and he began shovelling in fresh spoonfuls of tea.

"Not at all, not at all," Mrs. Grey answered, somewhat abashed, but rallying, "the *tea* itself is excellent, Mr. Randolph ; in fact, everything is delicious. There is nothing I like better than these entertainments *sans façons*. You do not drink tea, Mademoiselle ? Well, perhaps you are right, but for myself, I own it is a necessary of life. Another cup, Charlotte, *before* you put any more hot water in."

"Let me give you a screen, Miss Grey," said Mr. Fleming, leaning forward and handing Charlotte Mademoiselle Mathilde's large green fan which lay on the table. "Humphrey has had no mercy on you, you are in the hottest part of the room there, just by the fire," and poor Charlotte, whose tears, as we know, were always ready, was glad to hide her burning cheeks and winking eyes behind this friendly shelter.

The party broke up by degrees ; Mademoiselle Mathilde went off to the Établissement, asking Rose, to whom she had taken a great fancy, to accompany her ; Charlotte slipped out after them ; Mr. Fleming had a sketch to finish in the afternoon light. We saw him walking along the rocky path that led up the mountain at the back, and Mrs. Grey ran out into the gallery to watch him.

"Mr. Fleming looks very pale and thin," she said, coming back, as he disappeared behind some bushes, "I am afraid that he works too hard, Mr. Randolph. He is all soul—all soul, and I fear that the sword may be wearing out the scabbard. I watch him sometimes as he walks up and down in front of the hotel, and wonder which of his beautiful works it is that is occupying his mind. And that reminds me, Mr. Randolph, where are the sketches that you promised to show me? I have been longing to see them ever since my arrival. You are not going away, Princess?"

Mrs. Grey had not succeeded in improving the acquaintance she had begun with the Princess Zaraikine; for Ersilia, who did not like her, and who, though perfectly and unaffectedly cordial in her manner with strangers, was apt to be rather silent in their company, had held aloof with a certain dignity and simplicity that had somewhat baffled Mrs. Grey. She sat down again now, however, and began to help Humphrey to place his sketches in the best light as he took them out of his portfolio.

"This is indeed pleasant," said Mrs. Grey, arranging herself, and raising her short-sighted eye-glass. "I expect a real treat, Mr. Randolph. No, pray do not take those away," as Humphrey laid aside some rough beginnings. "I like to see *everything*; an artist's first inspiration often seems to me even more valuable than his finished work. This view is taken from the Eaux-Bonnes, you say? Beautiful indeed— You were there for some time, I think," turning to Ersilia. "I should much like to know your opinion of it as a place to stay in—indeed, I have been longing to have some conversation with you on this and other subjects; you know many of my old friends I find, and I want especially to ask you about that poor young creature, Frances Sidney. It was only yesterday that I learned from Mademoiselle de Brisac that you are acquainted with her."

"I do know Mrs. Sidney very well," answered Ersilia, "she has been my friend for many years."

"Ah, then I could not have applied to a better person—beautiful, *most* beautiful, Mr. Randolph—I have so much wished to know the real truth of those sad stories that were afloat about her."

"About Mrs. Sidney?" said Ersilia, in extreme surprise. "We cannot be thinking of the same person."

"Oh, it is the same, I am sure," answered Mrs. Grey, "on that point I could not be mistaken. I knew her mother well, and this poor young thing lost her husband and child not three years after her marriage. It is said—beautiful again, Mr. Randolph—the wrong way up, is it? Ah, now I see; but clouds and mountains are so much alike, you know."

"I see Mr. Fleming coming back," said Ersilia, who perceived that Humphrey was fast losing patience at Mrs. Grey's graciously vague way of turning over his sketches, "perhaps he is in want of something; I believe I know all these drawings pretty well if you would like to go to him."

"Yes, pray do not let me detain you," said Mrs. Grey, affably, "we can discuss these together afterwards, Mr. Randolph; I shall thus have a double pleasure. But as regards Mrs. Sidney—I was about to say that I have heard more than once, and on the best authority, that she was desperately in love with a young Italian Count in Rome, and that the discovery broke her husband's heart."

"I cannot sit here and allow such stories to be repeated of my friends," said Ersilia, flushing up with an indignation that she did not attempt to repress. "I do not know who can be wicked enough to invent them. Mrs. Sidney had a younger sister who died three years ago at Rome, and who was engaged to an Italian gentleman; he has since married, and there is no foundation whatever for what you have heard. If you know Mrs. Sidney, you must understand how impossible it is to connect such a story seriously with her name."

"I can hardly say that I knew her—not personally," Mrs. Grey answered, "but I knew her mother, and I am

much pleased to hear what you say. I shall make a point of contradicting the story wherever I go—”

Humphrey waited to hear no more ; he escaped from the room, and went to find his master. Mr. Fleming was sitting on the low stone wall outside the hotel, smoking and placidly looking at the torrent ; a cloud had come down, he said, and hidden his view. He was greatly amused by Humphrey's indignant account of what had passed.

“That woman can talk nothing but scandal,” the lad said in much wrath ; “if she did not want to look at my sketches, why on earth did she make me pull them all out? I didn't want to show them to her.”

“The young man of genius does not like his works to be slighted,” said Mr. Fleming, laughing at him, “never mind, my boy, she admired your picture in Paris, you know—it is a great point to have got some one to admire that.”

Humphrey lingered outside until he thought Mrs. Grey would have done talking and turning over his sketches, and then went back to his rooms. As he mounted the few steps leading up to the street, he saw her come out of the front door and turn into a little post-office attached to the house, and going upstairs he found Ersilia alone in the dim room, where the fire was dying down, and the light fading as the sunshine travelled up the mountain-side. She was sitting where he had left her on a chair in the open doorway, but as she turned towards him on his entrance, there was a pale look on her face that startled him.

“Is anything the matter?” he asked hastily, going up to her.

“No, nothing,” she answered, rising, and beginning to collect the scattered sketches, “did you meet Mrs. Grey? She has just gone.”

“I saw her go into the post-office,” said Humphrey, “I was glad to keep out of her way. Are you sure there is nothing the matter?” he repeated.

“I am out of temper—nothing worse,” she replied, trying to smile ; “and when you came in, I believe I was

wishing that people did not provoke me so much. This world does not always suit me, Humphrey ; one ought to love one's neighbor, I know, but I cannot always do it. There are faults that I cannot readily forgive—faults that are common, that vulgarize a character, that destroy all the harmony and kindly feeling of life. I cannot like the people who have them."

"If you mean Mrs. Grey," answered Humphrey, "I think her the most intolerable woman I ever met."

"Indeed I do not think there can be many like her," said Ersilia, "she has been talking ever since you went away, Humphrey, and I cannot pardon her the things she has said, the insinuations she has made, the slurs she has cast. What can one say to a woman like that, who hints and shakes her head, and will not even speak out?—'a very strange story somewhere ; you know, you understand—' How should I know? how should I understand? No one ever spoke so to me before. I cannot bear to think of the things she said to me ; I feel as if I must myself have been in some way to blame."

She looked so much moved as she spoke, that Humphrey on his side felt a keen emotion.

"It is all my fault for leaving you alone with her," he said, "why should you trouble yourself about her gossip and scandal? I daresay it is all lies."

"Yes," she said, "I know that to you it must appear mere feminine gossip, not worth thinking about ; you do not know how cruel it is. But do not let us talk of it any more. See, there is Mr. Fleming come to look for you. Let us take a walk and forget Mrs. Grey. I shall have time, I think, to finish my sketch in the gorge before dinner."

Ersilia had begun to draw under Mr. Fleming's directions. "I had a few lessons in Rome, when I was a girl," she had said to him one day, when they were talking together, "but my uncle, who had no belief in the value or beauty of women's drawing, discouraged me then, and of late years my time has been taken up in other ways."

"Why should you not draw?" Mr. Fleming had answered. "You want to arrive at the heart of knowledge, and in drawing, at any rate, nothing will help you more than some practical experience to begin with," and Ersilia had ended by begging a sketch-book of Humphrey and setting to work.

They accompanied her now to the point in the gorge from which she was taking her sketch, and, leaving her there to draw by herself in peace, prolonged their walk for half an hour. On their return, she showed them her drawing. It was merely a pencil outline, and imperfectly executed, no doubt; but she had rendered with great spirit and accuracy the soaring upward sweep of the mountains as seen from the gorge of the Eaux-Chaudes.

"You are right, Mr. Fleming," she said, as they turned towards home, "I have already learned at least one lesson. I understand now, as I never did before, how it is that artists can become enamored of grandeur of form, apart from coloring. Those mountains—how shall I express it?—they seem to tower above one as one draws, and yet to wrap one round and possess one with their own beauty and grandeur."

They all walked back together to the village, and then Humphrey, who was in the habit of securing the letters as soon as they arrived, turned into the post-office. The mail was just in, and the postmaster was engaged in sorting out the letters; but after a few minutes' delay he found one for the Princess Zarakine, and the lad took it across to the hotel.

He found Ersilia in the salon with Mademoiselle Mathilde, awaiting the summons to dinner. She opened her letter, glanced through it, then started up.

"That is dreadful," she said; "I must go home at once."

"Go home!" cried Mademoiselle Mathilde. "What are you talking about, Ersilia? We are not to leave this till Saturday week, as you very well know. What is the matter? Whom is your letter from?"

"It is from the steward—from Leroy," said Ersilia.

"He tells me that a fever has broken out at La Chênaie, that it is in more than half the houses in the village, and that a woman and child have already died of it. It is owing to the hot season and heavy rains, he says. The cottages are old and badly drained, but he can do nothing without my authority. See, here is his letter, Aunt Mathilde. Oh, why did he not let me know before it was too late? I shall write to him at once, and tell him to expect me back immediately."

She crossed the room hastily, and sat down at her writing table whilst Mademoiselle Mathilde read the letter.

"I can really see no cause for all this excitement," she said, folding it up again, and looking very much fluttered. "You startle one so, Ersilia; you have no consideration for other people's feelings. How can we possibly go back immediately, when it is settled that we are to stay till Saturday week, and travel with Mrs. Grey? You know I cannot bear to be hurried."

"I had no intention of hurrying you, Aunt Mathilde," answered Ersilia. "I know that you could not start immediately; but I can make the journey with Roberts, and as you have to pay visits on your way back, and we should not in any case travel together further than Angoulême, I thought you would not mind my starting a few days before you."

"What! stay alone in this dismal hotel?" said Mademoiselle Mathilde. "Never. I should go out of my mind in three days with the noise of the wind and the water; it is only just endurable as it is. I never was so sick of a place in my life. Your whole scheme is absurd, Ersilia. What are you going to do when you get to La Chênaie? You will be of no use. The fever is sure to be infectious, and you will probably catch it and die. Don't expect me to come and take care of you; I should not think of running such a risk. But I know it is of no use talking. If you once take a thing into your head, you are so obstinate that nothing in the world will put it out again."

"Dear Aunt Mathilde," said Ersilia impetuously, flushing up, and with tears of impatience in her eyes, "what is the use of calling me obstinate, when I must do what I think right? If there were a thousand risks I ought to go. I don't believe there is the least danger of my taking the fever, but that can make no difference one way or the other. These people are my care; if I had known better what to do before, this would not have happened perhaps. They have, at least, a right to expect that I should go and help them in their trouble."

She began writing again, but laid down her pen in a moment, and sat looking very much perplexed and discomposed.

"Let me be of some use," said Humphrey, coming forward and speaking for the first time. "Cannot I set off at once with any messages, or orders, or anything you want to send? I would go anywhere in the world for you."

"Thank you, Humphrey," she answered, preoccupied; "but I ought to go myself if I can manage it. I was considering what it would be best to do."

"Oh, if the party is to be broken up at all, we had better all go," said Mademoiselle Mathilde, beginning to repent of her opposition, but still too much out of humor to withdraw it graciously. "No one can say that I have ever expressed a wish to stay here a day longer than is necessary, and I am not at all sure that I should like travelling with Mrs. Grey; she has so many boxes. It was she who proposed it, not I. I suppose, Ersilia, you will allow us sufficient time to have our clothes packed properly? Let me see, to-day is Tuesday—will Friday suit you? Very well then, let us start on Friday. I shall go at once and speak to Marie, that she may begin her preparations without delay. She is so careless and stupid, that we have not a moment more than enough."

Mr. Fleming had come into the room whilst Mademoiselle Mathilde was speaking. He went up to the table where Ersilia was writing.

"Are you going away on Friday?" he said.

"Yes," she answered, faltering a little as her eyes met his ; "I have had some bad news from La Chênaie. Will you take the trouble to read that letter, Mr. Fleming? You will understand then how it is."

He took the letter and began to read it, whilst Ersilia went on writing rapidly. Presently she looked up.

"You see I must go," she said, with a slight emphasis on the words that seemed at once to depreciate and to set aside all further opposition. "Self-reproach after the event is of very little use to those whom our errors most affect ; but I cannot help feeling that if I had looked into my affairs more thoroughly last spring, and trusted less to our old steward, this might not have happened. The cottages could have been set to rights by this time."

"That was not one of the schemes that he disapproved of then?" said Humphrey, remembering a former conversation with Ersilia. The question was not well-chosen, perhaps, but in truth, the lad hardly knew what he was saying. He was full of the wretchedness of this blank wall of separation let down, as it were, between him and the sunny days that he had thought yet remained to him. He spoke as one speaks in dull bodily pain to break the misery of sensation.

"No," Ersilia answered, "I never thought of the drainage, Humphrey ; my schemes were of quite another kind." She began folding up and sealing her letter. The dinner-bell was ringing, but Mademoiselle Mathilde was not yet come back, and no one heeded the summons. "One of my plans I still hope to carry out," Ersilia went on, "though I do not know when that will be now. You know," she said, turning to Mr. Fleming, "the greater part of my uncle's collections was sold at his death, but many of the things he most valued he left to me. I have a great desire to build a large library or museum at La Chênaie to receive them, which would always be open to the people of the village, even when I was not there, so that the collection might in some sort become public property."

"Is there anyone there who would care for them?"

said Mr. Fleming, "fine works of art and the people who can appreciate them are comparatively so rare in this world, that I have a feeling that they ought not to be separated."

"That is what I think too," answered Ersilia, "but my idea was that this collection should be a kind of school where the village people might receive an education that would enable them, by degrees, to understand and appreciate what they see there. I have been very much laughed at, and blamed too, for this thought; indeed, old Leroy told me that to carry it out at all, as I proposed, would create so much prejudice and misunderstanding that I have given up the plan for the present. But I have a very strong feeling about it, nevertheless. I do not think we should rest contented in seeing some of the noblest pleasures of life confined to a few. I think everyone ought to have a share in them, and as these families on the estate are the people with whom I shall have the most to do, I should like to try to make them understand some of my own best pleasures."

Ersilia spoke eagerly, with an enthusiasm that lighted up her face and made it—so one of her listeners thought—more beautiful than he had ever seen it before.

"I understand your idea," Mr. Fleming said in answer, "I think that in itself it is a very noble one. It would be well if more people thought as you do in these matters."

"But you too think my plans Utopian?" said Ersilia.

"I do not say so," he answered, "I do not know the details of your scheme. But I am not sure that you understand—a mind like yours hardly could understand perhaps—how difficult it might be to make even a first impression where the intellect has been untrained for generations."

"But I should like to be the one to begin the training," said Ersilia; "I daresay that much could not be done with the old people, but many of the younger ones are very intelligent, and I feel sure that they might learn a great deal that would help them on, by giving them wider

and more beautiful views of life. No, I do not give up my plan yet," she said, smiling a little. "Aunt Mathilde often calls me obstinate—I think that perhaps I am," and then Mademoiselle Mathilde, for whom they had been waiting, came bustling into the room, and they all went down stairs to dinner.

CHAPTER XI.

The Gates Close.

SOME distance beyond the Eaux-Chaudes, the mountains that hem in the gorges on either side open abruptly to the left, revealing a land of wild ravines and valleys that lose themselves among the forest-covered peaks, the dark slopes, the bare precipices that rise on every side. A path winding amongst these leads, it is said, to a distant lake, and an expedition to visit it had been already arranged for the day following that on which Ersilia received her letter. Mrs. Grey was unwell and could not be of the party, but everyone else went, on ponies, on donkeys, and on foot. Even Mademoiselle Mathilde, who liked excitement and amusement in any shape, and dreaded nothing so much as an hour's solitude, was willing to exchange the anxieties of packing for the difficulties of this mountain road, along which the little lad who served as guide, conducted them.

The path they followed sank rapidly from the upper road of the gorge to the wild broken ground of the valley below ; then mounting again, led onwards through the silent forest. To the left was a deep ravine filled with trees ; beyond rose the wall of a great terraced mountain, its bare summit yellow against the blue sky ; in front, through and above the trees, peaks rose into view. The sunlight streamed down upon the moss and undergrowth, a cow with a clanging bell strayed across the path, birds were singing somewhere in the forest, there was the far-off sound of an axe, and then all was silent again.

"I think this is an enchanted land," said Ersilia, standing still for a moment on the shadow-flecked path. She had dismounted from her pony, which Humphrey

was leading ; the rest of the party had gone on, and were for the moment out of sight amongst the trees. "I have sometimes thought," said Ersilia, walking on again, "that there is nothing I should like better than to be possessed, if only for a single day, with one of the old-world beliefs in haunted woods and streams and mountains. Imagine what it would be, Humphrey, to believe this whole land around us peopled with unseen rustling forms that might at any moment reveal themselves. I do not know whether one ought to think of fawns and hamadryads in a Pyrenean forest, but I could be quite contented with mediæval wood and mountain demons."

She spoke playfully, as she often did to Humphrey, but he could not answer in the same strain. The lad was in a state of feverish excitement, none the less real that it was hidden under a gloomy and silent exterior. All night long he had paced his room, or flung himself upon his bed to toss restlessly from side to side. The coming separation, the abrupt ending to these weeks of what he told himself was the only real life he had ever known, that he ever could know ; above all the gnawing conviction of which he was only the more intensely conscious because he obstinately strove to stifle it—the boy was in a mood half-desperate, half-despairing.

"I don't see that the old beliefs are wholly lost to us," he answered. "I think they were passions and memories that took form to people the old world, and these are with us still if we have eyes to see them. I know for my own part, that if I were ever to visit these woods again, I should find every step haunted by a presence as sacred and as beautiful as ever Greek or Roman imagined."

"What do you mean, Humphrey?" said Ersilia, turning round with a startled look in her eyes ; he had spoken in a voice that she had never heard from him before. "You are in earnest, whilst I was only in jest," she said calmly in a moment, "but you are right. I suppose an old belief never is wholly lost to us ; the spirit cannot die, and the form too, before it changes, is most often cast in some imperishable mould."

"That is not what I meant," answered Humphrey, "I mean—," but an abrupt turn in the path brought them to where the rest of the party were standing, awaiting their arrival.

"Mr. Humphrey, I do beg of you to keep near me," said Mademoiselle Mathilde, as soon as they appeared, "I never saw such a road as this in my life, and it is growing worse and worse. I believe we have taken the wrong turning, and that it does not lead to the lake at all. I fully expect to return home with a leg or an arm broken; my pony has stumbled half-a-dozen times already."

The path, in fact, grew wilder and rougher, as it wound upwards and deeper into the forest; the ground was more broken, and trunks of trees uprooted in some storm or washed down by some torrent, continually obstructed the way. Charlotte and Rose got off their donkeys and left the animals to scramble on as best they could; but Mademoiselle Mathilde, insisting upon dismounting and mounting again at each one of these barriers, kept Humphrey continually occupied in helping her. At another time he might have been amused or bored, now he was indifferent. What did it matter? One burning thought—a new thought that had come to him in the watches of the night—more and more possessed him. Ersilia was going away, and she would know nothing of his love. Did she know nothing? Once as he was silently helping her over some difficulty in the path, his eyes, full of gloom, met hers, and in them he seemed to see a new expression at once searching and inquiring; but she did not speak, and as he fell back to assist Mademoiselle Mathilde, she passed on in front amongst the trees with Mr. Fleming.

Humphrey, absorbed in his own thoughts, did not notice that one other of the party was almost as melancholy as himself, till presently, as they were walking along a more level space, a little grey figure came slipping up to his side. It was Charlotte, who had met with more than one disaster since the expedition set out. Her Spanish saddle had turned, and she had been thrown to

the ground ; she had lost a glove, and she had torn her frock in an ineffectual attempt to reach a fern that she thought her aunt would like.

"Charlotte always tears her frocks," Miss Rose said composedly, promptly producing a neat little house-wife from her pocket, and presenting her cousin with a needle and thread.

"It is not very much torn this time," Ersilia answered, "never mind it now, Charlotte ; you cannot well mend it yourself, but I will do it for you as soon as we stop."

Charlotte then, with her torn frock and her sorrowful face, came up to Humphrey, who was walking a little apart from the others.

"Mr. Fleming says that you and he are going to Argelès the same day that the Princess Zaraikine leaves," she said. "I am so sorry you are all going away."

"It is very good of you to say so," Humphrey answered, gloomily, "but these things cannot be helped, Miss Grey, and I don't know that there is much use talking about them."

"Do you think not?" she said, "but it will be so dull when you are gone. You know we do not leave till Saturday week, and I don't know what I shall do. It was very dull before we came to the Eaux-Chaudes, but since we have been here, and I have known you and the Princess Zaraikine, it has been quite different. I am very sorry you are going, and I think you are sorry, too ; you look so."

"Do I?" said Humphrey, unable to help smiling, and looking down he saw a little face turned up to his with so kind and simple an expression that his gloom almost vanished for the moment.

"I *am* very sorry," he said, "but you know we shall soon be in Paris, Miss Grey, and then we shall all meet again."

"Yes, that will be nice," she said, "I am glad for that reason that we are going there for the winter."

"For no other reason? Don't you like Paris?" said Humphrey.

"Not much—not so much as Brussels. I used to have no friends in Paris, and then it was very dull," said Charlotte, in whom a capacity for enjoyment had apparently not been developed. "Now I shall like it better, but I hoped that Aunt Maria would go back to Brussels."

"You were not dull in Brussels, then?" said Humphrey.

"No, oh no!" she said, "I was very happy there last winter. I wish we could go back there again; I wish I could be as happy again, but that will never be."

"Why not?" said Humphrey, sorry for the poor little girl and her troubles. "People say that it is just when life seems dullest that the best things happen. I don't know if it is true, but so they say."

"Yes," replied Charlotte; "but it is different with me, because it is not for myself only—" She stopped short, as though afraid of saying too much, and colored up; and just then, hearing her name called from behind, she ran back to where the rest of the party were standing.

They had turned aside into a little sunny glade, watered by a marshy stream, and full of soft grass and flowers. Mademoiselle Mathilde had declared herself exhausted, and unable to go a step further without at least half an hour's rest. She had dismounted from her pony, and was now comfortably seated in the shade of a beech tree. Ersilia began to mend Charlotte's frock, and Rose, who had already announced more than once that she had been learning to paint, immediately, to Mr. Fleming's great amusement, produced an elaborate apparatus for water-color drawing, sat down, and began to improve these idle moments by sketching the surrounding scenery. He stood watching her for a few minutes, and finding that she was not at all disconcerted, presently sat down beside her.

"Might I venture to make a suggestion?" he said, and very good-naturedly began to give her some elementary information. Rose listened with round eyes. "That is not at all the way my mistress taught me," she said

not without scorn, and taking up her brush again, set to work as before.

"Come with me, Humphrey," said Mr. Fleming, getting up and laughing; "I want to find out whether there is anything to be seen of this lake. I have an idea that, as Mademoiselle Mathilde suggests, we have taken the wrong path."

And so it proved. Not a hundred yards from where they had been sitting, the trees grew thinner and the road came to an end. They had reached the edge of the forest, and before them lay a wild and pathless tract, strewn with rocks, tossed into hollows and ridges, running up on every side to meet the giant slopes of the mountains; in the midst the snow-flecked dome and sharp precipices of the Pic du Midi rising into the blue air. They were high up in the heart of the mountains, but there was no lake.

Mademoiselle Mathilde was triumphant when they returned to her with this intelligence.

"Did I not tell you so?" she said. "I knew that boy was not to be trusted; I was convinced of it. We may think ourselves lucky that he has not led us into the midst of a gang of robbers. For my own part I am delighted; I could not have gone a step further to see the finest lake in the world. Now I suppose you will all want something to eat; English people can never exist without food for more than three hours together." Where has that boy put the basket? Ersilia—where is Ersilia? Oh, she has gone on with Mr. Fleming to see the view. Rose, my child, tell the boy to bring the baskets here into the shade, and you and Charlotte can unpack them."

Humphrey moved away from the voices and clatter, away from the shadow of the trees to the sunlight and openspace beyond. He looked round for Ersilia; he had kept aloof from her, or she had avoided him—he could hardly have told which—while they were all together in the forest; but now that he had lost the consciousness of her presence, he was seized with a feverish anxiety to speak to her, to hear her voice, to read her face, to assure

himself of he knew not what. But she had walked on with Mr. Fleming, and on the hilly and broken ground they were already out of sight. A fierce and angry jealousy, that for weeks had been smouldering, only half repressed, leapt into sudden life in the lad's heart. He flung himself down upon a bank amongst the ferns and bushes, and lay sullenly plucking at the grass and wild flowers that grew around.

All at once he raised himself on one elbow and looked up. Amongst some trees that covered a little grassy ridge at no great distance, Ersilia and Mr. Fleming were slowly making their way back to the forest. They were not looking towards him as he lay half hidden amongst the ferns, but he could see them distinctly—to his life's end he will see them, two figures amongst the slender birch-trees, against that vast sunny background of pastures, and peaks, and forests. They moved slowly along side by side, then paused; Ersilia looked up, he took her hand in his—

The earth seemed to waver, the sunshine to widen and dazzle till it wrapped away mountains and forests, and Mr. Fleming and Ersilia in one swift blaze; then all was dark and still, as Humphrey lay with his face hidden on the ground. He knew it, he had known it all along; no word, no look had escaped him—and yet he had never believed it till now.

How long he lay there he never knew, but presently he heard voices calling from the wood, then a low murmur, footsteps passing near him, and a pause. He looked, and saw Ersilia coming towards him across the little meadow that sloped downwards from the bank, then lay with his face hidden as before.

In a moment he heard the rustle of her garments, and the soft movement of her feet amongst the grass and flowers as she came and stood beside him; but he did not move.

"Humphrey," she said, in a strange, sweet voice, which yet had in it some undertone of anxiety.

He raised his head. "I love you, Ersilia!" he cried,

in a voice which seemed to himself to resound and echo till it filled the air. He dropped his head again on his folded arms, and lay motionless. There was a long pause.

"Humphrey," she said again. There was a subtle change in her voice that chilled the lad's heart with a sudden fear. All the sweet days that they had known together swept before him and faded. He raised himself slowly, and stood leaning his back against a tree.

"Forgive me," he said, "I think I am mad."

"No, I have nothing to forgive," she said with the most heartfelt earnestness, "but I am very sorry. I cannot bear the thought of giving you pain."

There were tears in her eyes as she spoke. Humphrey hated himself for having brought them there at such a moment.

"There is no pain," he said, "or if there is, I would rather have it than be without it—it is not that. I think my love for you is what is best in me. If I am ever worth anything, it will be because I have known, and had in me the power of loving the noblest and most beautiful lady on earth. But I meant never to tell you of it—I have not in all these weeks—I know what I must appear to you—a mere boy as you once said, and that—that Mr. Fleming—when I saw you together just now, I knew how it was——"

His words ended in a sob. He broke away before she could answer him, and by the time he joined the party under the trees, the luncheon was nearly over, and Mademoiselle Mathilde was claiming all Ersilia's attention.

Their return home was hastened by a threatening thunderstorm. The afternoon changed with the suddenness common in mountainous regions, and a flash of lightning and the distant roll of thunder warned them to depart.

"I am not in the least afraid of thunder and lightning," said Mademoiselle Mathilde, who, in fact, was a most courageous little woman, and I believe feared nothing; "at the same time a storm in the forest will be ex-

tremely dangerous, and I should prefer living a little longer if possible ; there always remains the risk of breaking our necks as we go down. Have you seen my shawl, Ersilia ?—and my umbrella ? Thank you, Mr. Fleming. Now, Mr. Humphrey, I depend upon you to take care of me as we return.”

Humphrey desired nothing better. He was glad that their hurried descent through the forest rendered conversation impossible ; once or twice he fancied that Ersilia approached him as if to speak, but he pulled his hat over his eyes and strode on. The mountains covered themselves with clouds, but the storm kept off for the moment, and they reached the upper road to the Eaux-Chaudes in safety. Here they found a carriage that had been ordered to await them at this point. They all got in, with the exception of Humphrey, who said that he preferred walking, and who accordingly made the rest of the journey on foot in the society of the little guide and the donkeys.

CHAPTER XII.

Outside.

It was nearly dark by the time Humphrey reached the Eaux-Chaudes. Dinner was over at the hotel, and the down stairs rooms were empty. His one desire was to meet no one again that night, and he was making his way out, when he saw Mr. Fleming coming down the long hall-passage to the little reading-room at one end. There was only a dim light from a small oil-lamp, and Humphrey hoped to escape unnoticed, but Mr. Fleming saw him and stopped.

"Are you going up stairs, Humphrey?" he said.

"No," the lad answered, "I am going out to watch the storm; it seems to be coming on grandly. Good night, Sir."

"Good-night, my boy, if we don't see anything more of you." Mr. Fleming answered so kindly and cheerily that Humphrey felt persuaded he knew nothing of what had passed. A wild thought darted through his brain; he stood looking after his master for a moment, then with a sudden impulse, turned and went straight up stairs to the sitting-room.

The door was half open and he could see into the room full of the lights and shadows of a glowing wood fire. Ersilia was sitting in front of it alone, her cheek resting on her hand, and on her face a noble and tender expression that no words can describe. She started as Humphrey came in and walked up to the mantel-piece.

"I beg your pardon," he said with a desperate calm-


ness, "I did not mean to disturb you, I only want to say one word, and then I am going away again. I only want to know—I have no right to ask, I daresay ; but I cannot endure uncertainty—anything is better than that—"

"There need be no uncertainty," Ersilia answered, very clearly and gently, looking at him the while like one who must wound, but who would also heal. "I am going to marry Mr. Fleming, if that is what you mean, Humphrey."

"Thank you," he said, "yes, that is what I meant. I knew it must be so, but I wished to be quite certain. It is very good of you to tell me." He took her hand in his, and raised it to his lips. "God bless you!" he said, and left the room.

He went outside into the grey night, the gathering storm, that best suited his mood, and walked up and down the little platform in front of the hotel. The clouds had come down and filled the gorge above, below, and on every side, till only the little space of the village was clear in the mist. It was as though a great curtain had been let down, shutting it out from the rest of the world. Presently the mist came lower still, into the very street, flashes of blue lightning lighted it up: ruddy gleams shone from the windows; the people were still walking, standing, chattering in their evening idleness, but Humphrey shivered, chilled to the heart. He lingered outside till the flickering firelight in the window overhead changed to a steady glow, till a shadow passed and a curtain was drawn; then he made his way across the street to his rooms at the post-office.

A few drops of rain were falling as he entered the house, and by the time he had got up stairs and struck a light, he could hear it pelting down. He opened his window, and it came rushing in from the outer darkness: mountains and sky were alike lost in the blinding sheets of rain and mist, the thunder echoed and re-echoed in dull rolling peals. How did such a night appear, he wondered with inexpressible bitterness, by the warm



the yonder room, that he still seemed to see faintly in the blackness? He closed the window, and sat at the table, with his head resting on his folded arms.

No need to dwell on that vigil, on the boy's passionate longing and heart-sick despair. The wild darkness without seemed to add to the darkness within. The mists that had come down to shut out the world, seemed in like manner to have shut out from him his past and future life, leaving only the present with its desolation. What remained to him? His master? He would not think of him. His art? For months past he had had no thought, no hope, no aspiration that was not bound up with the smile of those sweet eyes, the praise of those sweet lips. It was for the moment as though through that thick darkness he were groping for his own soul that he had lost. . .

He roused himself at last, and began to walk up and down the room. As he did so, his eye fell on an unfinished sketch that was lying in one corner; it was a view of the mountains by daybreak, taken from the slope behind the house; he had intended to finish it the very next morning and give it to Ersilia before she left. The sight of it now changed the whole current of his thoughts; he began to think of the day that was coming, and of how he should meet it. He could not meet it, he said to himself—he would go away. He could not stay where he was; he could not face the old life, whose familiar details suddenly rose before him with a sickening vividness under such altered conditions. To the young everything appears final; they have no experience of the modifying circumstances that shade off the most abrupt changes of life, and to them escape always seems easier than endurance. He would go away, Humphrey thought; he would cross the mountains into Spain, and there travel and make his own way, as many a young fellow had done before him. He would start in the early morning before anyone was up, no one should try to stop him; but he would write from his first halting-place, and say where he was and what he was going to do. Something of new

courage and hope rose in his heart as he came to this resolution. He had both the egotism and the humility of youth, and it did not occur to him that any independent action of his might affect the happiness of others.

He set about his preparations at once, that he might lose no time in the morning. He had plenty of money with him for present use ; he put up his passport and papers, collected his sketches and drawing-materials, packed some of his things into a knapsack that he had brought with him for mountain excursions, and the rest into a portmanteau to be sent after him. When all was ready, he would not lie down for fear of over-sleeping himself, but drew a chair to the window to wait for the dawn. It was long past midnight ; the storm was over and the mists all gone ; the stars shone faintly in a grey blue sky, and a peaceful moonlight lay upon all, transforming the homely old fashioned houses with a new beauty, as it sparkled on the wet roofs and white walls. Night after night, Humphrey, leaning from his window, had looked down upon the little village wrapped round so closely by the mountains, till he knew every roof and window. Now he gazed for the last time upon the sleeping houses ; the lights were all put out ; only at the end of the street one oil lamp was burning. He looked across to the hotel, where rows of closed and shuttered windows blankly reflected the white moonlight. " God bless her !" he cried once more, stretching out his arms, " and him too," he added after a moment's pause, dropping his head on his hands. Something of the peace of the still night, the clear air seemed to pass into his soul ; he threw himself into his chair, and tired out fell asleep.

When he awoke again, the grey light of morning was everywhere, and high up in the sky some red-tinged clouds were already floating. Humphrey had no time to lose ; he went quickly about his last preparations, and then, taking up his knapsack, crept softly down the dark wooden stairs. Early as it was, the house was already astir ; the kitchen door by which he had to pass stood wide open, and some women who had come down with

milk and butter from the mountain dairies were standing round the fire. They were too busy chattering, however, to notice Humphrey, and he passed out, as he hoped, unobserved.

He walked up the village street, grey and chilly in the chill morning air, across the bridge where he had once lingered with Ersilia, and so gained the winding road beyond. He walked along quickly in the brightening dawn, nor did he pause till he had reached a point where the torrent, receding for a space from the bank, left a strip of grassy shore where a saw-mill had been erected. It had often been the turning-point in their evening walks, and here Humphrey too once more turned and looked back. Behind him, hidden by many a bend of the road, lay the houses of the Eaux-Chaudes, haunted for him by an inexpressible grief, by a wild, hopeless longing. He had started from an impulse that had passed without conflict into a resolution, and there was nothing to turn him from his purpose now ; but many minutes passed before he took up his knapsack again, and once more went upon his way. The land lay before him all glorious in the early morning ; a land of deep blue shadows touched by the sunlight into vivid green, of misty purple mountains, of softest meadows sloping down to meet the winding road. The waterfalls dripped from the rocks ; the sheep-bells tinkled far and near ; shepherds passed him with their flocks, and women with girt-up skirts, walking by the side of heavily laden carts. But the lad hardly noted these things at the time, as he walked on with a bent head and a heart full of unutterable bitterness.

CHAPTER XIII.

Humphrey tries to escape.

THE sun was already high, and the morning freshness almost gone, when Humphrey saw before him the scattered houses of the last village in France. They lie deep among the mountains, at the foot of a pine-covered slope tracked by dry water courses, and backed by lofty peaks, which the mists that had fallen in rain last night at the Eaux-Chaudes had whitened with the first snows of the season. The carriage road ends with the village, but to the left a bridle path leads immediately to the wild pass, where snow bridges span the torrent in winter, and avalanches came crashing down amongst the pines and beech-trees.

Almost the last house in the village was an unpretending hotel, and Humphrey, who had had nothing to eat that day, made his way up to it, intending to breakfast there and get some information about his route. A few stone steps on one side led up from the road to a little raised platform or terrace, on which the door of the house opened. A woman came out to meet him ; a woman with a long, melancholy face, which Humphrey somehow thought he remembered.

"So you are come at last," she said, looking at him and nodding. "Where is the *belle dame* who was with you?"

"She is not with me to-day," Humphrey answered. The woman's words had awakened a memory that came

with a sudden pang. "I remember you now," he said ; "you were good enough to give us places in your cart one evening."

"Yes, it was I. I thought I should see you again," said the woman ; "every one comes here when the weather is fine ; when the snow is down it is another thing. Are you going to the Plâteau ? Do you want a guide ? My son is at home and can go with you. No one knows the mountains better than my Baptiste, though he is but young ; he has been with his father since he was that high. Will you have breakfast before you start ? We have trout just caught, which will be ready directly. What has become of the *belle dame* ? Has she gone away ?"

"I am not going to the Plâteau, I am going into Spain," said Humphrey, as soon as he could speak. "Can you tell me anything about the road ?"

"Baptiste can go with you," answered the woman, promptly. "You had better hire one of our mules, and Baptiste will accompany you across the frontier and return with the animal ; that will be best."

Humphrey had intended making the journey on foot ; but he was tired and uncertain of the distance, and would not dispute the point. He hired the mule, and ordered some breakfast ; then, as they were entering the house, cheered somehow by the sight of a face that was not wholly strange, asked if he could have a pen and some paper. It had occurred to him that he could write from here to the Eaux-Chaudes, and send the letter by a messenger. They would thus have news of him almost before they had time to miss him, whilst he would be already far on his road. I think it was more from the wish to have the letter over than any distinct idea that his departure might be the cause of anxiety or suspense that he came to this conclusion. If, on looking back now, he cannot wholly acquit himself of ingratitude at this time towards his master, he had no consciousness of it then. When he thought of Mr. Fleming, it was as of a man in whom the consciousness of an exquisite

happiness must needs swallow up all lesser emotions ; and perhaps, for the moment, he was not far wrong.

But when writing materials were brought to him in the little wooden room in which he sat waiting for his breakfast, he could not make up his mind as to whom he should write, or what he should say. He sat pondering with his head in his hands, but the words would not come ; at last resolving to make another attempt after breakfast, he pushed the paper from him, and went out to await the making of his coffee and the frying of his trout on the little stone platform outside.

He was leaning over the low wall, looking down upon the valley, and on the road lost immediately in the ravine beyond, when he heard a cracking of whips and jingling of bells behind him, and looking round he saw a carriage come driving through the village and up to the inn door. Already, before it stopped, Humphrey had recognized Mademoiselle Mathilde's yellow bonnet on the front seat, and Rose's hat and feathers on the box by the driver, and all at once he remembered what to that moment he had entirely forgotten, that a long talked of excursion had been fixed for this very day ; and there they all were, Mademoiselle Mathilde and the Princess Zaraikine, Charlotte and Rose in the carriage, and Mr. Fleming following on horseback.

Could Humphrey have escaped at that moment, he would have done so, but it was too late. The remainder of the excursion was to be performed on horseback or on foot, and the party were already alighting from the carriage which was to remain at the inn till their return.

"If there is a decent room in the place, I shall stop here till you come back," Mademoiselle Mathilde was saying as she came up the little flight of steps, "it will be extremely dull, and the people, so far as I can make out, are a little better than savages ; but that cannot be helped. One must, of course, see everything that is to be seen, but it is too much to have this sort of thing two days running. No one admires fine scenery more than I do, but I like a little relief from it, I own, and I have seen

and heard of nothing else for weeks. There are other things in the world than mountains and forests. I could almost wish that I had had a headache and stopped in bed this morning like the excellent Mrs. Grey. Marie would have attended me, and all would have been comfortable, whereas now—Good Heavens, Mr. Humphrey, where did you drop from?"

Humphrey, who had retreated into the shadow of the doorway, came forward at these words, looking haggard and dusty enough, no doubt, in the bright streaming sunshine, and found himself confronting the whole party, Rose, Charlotte, and last of all, Ersilia, who had lingered a moment to collect some of Mademoiselle Mathilde's straying properties. She came straight up to Humphrey, looking at him with sweet, anxious eyes.

"You *are* here, Humphrey," she said, "we heard that you had been seen leaving the village at daybreak this morning, and I thought we should perhaps find that you had come on here before us."

"What made you do that, my boy?" said Mr. Fleming, looking at him kindly. "You should have waited and come with us; you look as if you had tired yourself out before the day began. Have you had any breakfast? I am going to order some coffee, and we can have it together before going on further."

He went into the inn as he spoke. Mademoiselle Mathilde had already disappeared within the interior, Rose and Charlotte followed, but Humphrey walked away again to the side of the little platform leaning, as before, with folded arms on the low stone wall. Five minutes since, he had seen a vision of himself travelling along the road below, weary and forlorn indeed, but with a resolute heart, and now all at once his resolution had begun to waver, to melt away. Should he go now, at once, whilst they were all at breakfast within, without seeing them again? With a sudden feverish desire to do anything rather than wait there and meet a thousand questions for which he had no answer, the lad raised himself and prepared to go, when, turning round, he

faced Ersilia, who was standing just behind him. He gave one glance at her face and would have passed on; but she put out her hand to detain him.

"Humphrey," she said in an unsteady voice, "I cannot bear to see you so unhappy."

He looked up again. She was very pale, and her lips quivered a little as she returned the gaze. He had never before seen her so much moved, and it nearly broke his heart.

"Why did you come here?" he said, miserably, moving a pace or two away. "I meant to trouble no one—if I am unhappy, I can bear it. I forgot you were all coming here to-day; I have nothing to do with that now. I did not mean to see you again; I meant to go away—into Spain—anywhere—"

"Go away?" she said, "from us—from Mr. Fleming?"

"Yes," he answered, "I would have written from here to tell you—it will be better so—"

She did not answer at once. She stood beside him, with one hand resting on the low wall, and looking down into the valley as though she too saw a vision of a toiling, dusty Humphrey lessening before her eyes.

"Humphrey," she said at last, turning to him, and speaking very earnestly, "you must not go; I could not bear it, knowing that it is I who have done you so great an injury."

"You? an injury?" he said, flushing, "would it be an injury if one were lifted up into Heaven by some angel, and learnt that for a little space, one was not quite unworthy to breathe the same air? That is what these days have been to me. It is fate and my own madness that has brought them to an end."

She was silent for a moment, and there were tears in her eyes as she answered. "That is what seems to me so sad," she said, "that these days which I had thought would leave a memory that through all our lives we should be glad to turn to again, should work you harm through me. We have been such good companions and

friends. I remember long ago, when we were children and spent that day together, thinking that I should like to have a brother like you, and somehow, when I saw you again, the old wish and the old feeling came back."

"I, too, remember the time when we were children," Humphrey answered, "I think I loved you then—why not? You were different from any one I had ever seen before, from all the world. You always will be—" his voice broke, he turned his head away; how could he tell her of all the love and jealousy that had been raging in his heart? "I have no right to say all this now," he went on, "and nothing can ever be again as it has been. You see it is best for me to go away; why should you wish to stop me?"

"Because I cannot think it best that you should leave your work and Mr. Fleming," she said earnestly. "Perhaps I have no right to urge you— You must forgive me, Humphrey, but—since I have known you, I have thought so much of your future, of what you might and ought to make it. I think there is no nobler work than that which through pure and lofty beauty lifts men to nobler thoughts, and I liked to think that there was some one belonging to me to whom the power to do such work was given."

"I thought you would not care now—" the lad said, half choking as he spoke; and then ashamed, perhaps of the boyish speech, he went on quickly, "I am not going to give my work up, I can go on studying wherever I am."

"But not with Mr. Fleming," answered Ersilia. "I think, Humphrey, it would be better that I had never known you than that I should come between you and Mr. Fleming. You love him and he loves you. I heard him say once that to have such a pupil as you are, and such as you promise to be in the future, was almost like having a second life before him to live through. You will not disappoint him by going away now?"

She laid her hand on his arm as she spoke: her eyes looked at him entreatingly, her voice seemed to float and linger in his ears. What could he do?

"I will not go," he said, "you don't know what you are asking of me, but I will not go," and then, all at once he knew that he had never meant to go, from the very first moment that she had asked him to stay.

CHAPTER XIV.

Return.

It was on a bright afternoon, towards the end of October, that Humphrey first saw Ersilia again. She had been four days in Paris, and he had already called twice without seeing her ; but being told by Mr. Fleming that she would certainly be at home this afternoon, he started to make a third attempt.

The apartment occupied by the Princess Zaraikine was in a house that had belonged to Monsieur de Florian, and which many years ago, during the lifetime of his parents, had been entirely inhabited by members of his own family. But these were long since dead or dispersed, and Monsieur de Florian, living chiefly abroad, had reserved for himself only the first floor, letting the remainder in apartments. It was a big old house in the Rue —, near the upper end of the Chaussée d'Antin, standing amongst other houses that had a newer and fresher air than itself. (It no longer exists—only the other day I witnessed its overthrow and disappearance before modern improvement.) The great *porte-cochère* led into a lofty, dark, unevenly paved passage, running beneath the front of the house to the court-yard beyond. At the entrance a clatter of voices might be heard from behind the red-curtained glass door of the porter's lodge ; at the other end, a wide staircase with dimly polished steps and a heavy balustrade led upwards through the house. On the first landing, two entrance-doors faced each other on either side of the window looking on to the court-yard, and led respectively to the apartments occupied by the Princess Zaraikine and by Mademoiselle de Brişac.

Ersilia was at home, and Humphrey was shown into a large, dim salon full of worn and faded furniture. M. de Florian had cared too little for his Paris home to spend much money on its adornment, and the chairs and tables dated probably from the time of his own marriage, some forty years before. Only a wood-fire blazing on the wide hearth and shining in tall narrow mirrors set in recesses round the room, and the lights reflected from the gold backgrounds of one or two pictures by early Italian painters on the walls, made a sudden brightness here and there. A door at one end stood open and showed the dining-room beyond, a cheerful room panelled with light oak and full of afternoon sunshine, a glass cupboard with china in one corner, and large windows looking out upon the yellowing trees waving in the courtyard.

Another door opened, and Ersilia was in the room, her hands held out in sweet and cordial welcome.

"I was sorry to miss you when you called before, Humphrey," she said, "but I have been almost constantly out since our return to Paris. Aunt Mathilde has been refurnishing her apartment—you know she has her own rooms on the other side of the house—and that has given us a great deal to do. It was very good of you to come so soon."

"It has seemed a long time to me," he answered.

She looked at him with an expression, half anxious, half wistful, in her eyes, before which his own sank. Who was he, the lad had asked himself many times during these last few weeks, that through his rashness and want of self-command he should have been the cause of one moment's uneasiness or pain to this sweet lady!

"Let us come into the library," she said, "I have been working there all day; it is the room I like best to sit in. Old Lebrun is there, he came from La Chênaie this morning; but we have just finished our business together, and he will be gone directly."

Humphrey followed her into the adjoining room. A fire was burning here also, but the window was open, letting in the fresh afternoon air, and an echo, as it were,

of the departed summer in the vague street noises. There were some late roses, a tall china jar, and a litter of leaves and petals on a little table near the window, and Ersilia's embroidery frame stood in a corner by the fire ; but it was a room of books, and bronzes, and marbles. Round the upper part of the walls, beneath the ceiling, ran a broad shelf on which were arranged busts, alternating with antique helmets and jars of red and black pottery ; below, bookcases lined two sides of the room and filled the recesses on either side of the window, and here and there, on a bracket or stand, some objects of special value stood out in dark or pale relief against the dull green walls. There were some framed drawings above the mantel-piece ; a leather table covered with books and papers stood in front of the window, and an open bureau on one side of the fire-place.

A small shrewd-looking old man with white hair and keen black eyes was seated at the table tying up papers. He rose as Ersilia came in, buttoned up his coat, and stood waiting with his hat in his hand, as though ready to depart.

"You are in a hurry to go, Lebrun," said Ersilia, "and I will not detain you longer. I think I have said all that is necessary, and you will let me know how the work goes on, and whether the families Guérin and Du-bois are satisfied with their new cottages."

"Madame should receive constant reports," the old man said bowing.

"I hope to be at La Chênaie again early in the new year," Ersilia went on, "by that time no doubt everything will be completed. And you are not to forget," she said, smiling, "that you are to allow me to begin my new library in the spring."

"I, Madame? What have I to do with it? Madame may build a hundred libraries if she likes ; there is money enough for everything, if that were all. I know nothing about books, and heads, and pictures," with a disdainful glance round the room, "but I know where an ear of corn is the fullest, and when a man makes a wry face

without any tears behind it, and that is my notion of managing an estate. There is money enough, but if we are to have schools, and lectures, and a hundred things that no one ever heard of before, and the people don't like them, and Monsieur le Curé takes to preaching against them, things will not go very smoothly."

"My good Lebrun, I am afraid of nobody's preaching but your own," answered Ersilia, unable to help laughing, "Monsieur le Curé, I am sure, will interfere with nothing that I may wish to do."

"Madame has won everyone's heart, and can do what she pleases, I know that very well," answered Lebrun, shrugging his shoulders, "the people have been as happy as possible hitherto in living and dying as their fathers did before them, but if Madame thinks she can make them any happier, there is nothing more to be said." He gathered up his papers, and still shrugging his shoulders, left the room.

"Has the fever quite disappeared?" said Humphrey.

"I hope so, there have been no new cases for a fortnight," said Ersilia. "I hope there is no danger of its reappearing. A pond at the lower end of the village is being drained, and two of the cottages have been pulled down, but there are others that only want repairing, and I am glad of that, for the people are attached to their old homes."

It was not till long afterwards that Humphrey learned that immediately on her arrival at La Chênaie, Ersilia had turned the château into a hospital, and with the aid of a *sœur de charité* had herself watched and tended the sick people day and night.

"Sit down, Humphrey," she said, presently, "whilst I finish arranging my flowers. They came from La Chênaie this morning. We have quantities of roses in the garden there, and Lebrun brought me a great basketful. He is a kind old man at heart, and always likes to do what he thinks will give me pleasure, though he has such a love of contradiction that he cannot help in the first instance opposing anything that is proposed."

She talked on as though to cover Humphrey's silence, for he had hardly spoken since he came, and stood now leaning against the mantel-piece watching Ersilia with her roses. She was thinner, he thought, than when he had last seen her; her cheeks were always pale, and she was tired now with a long morning's work, but yet he felt that some nameless change had passed over her, giving new depth and meaning to her beauty—the mystery of a hidden joy seemed to be held in the depths of her grey eyes, to rest on the pure and tender curves of her sweet lips.

He roused himself at last, however, and with an instinctive avoidance of anything personal, "That is a fine cast," he said. "Were all these casts and bronzes collected by M. de Florian?"

"Yes," Ersilia answered, "he purchased most of these many years ago; they are amongst my early childish recollections in the days when I used to come to Paris for a month or two every year. That is why I like this room so much. My uncle always sat here, and liked to have me with him. I used to learn my lessons and bring my dolls in here. That helmet he brought with him from Marathon, one year that we were in Greece together," she added, going up to where Humphrey was standing; "he had a separate memory attached to each."

"And these are the things that you wish to place in your new library at La Chênaie?" said Humphrey.

"These and some others which are still in the packing-cases in which they came from Rome; also some old china and pictures which are already at La Chênaie. It was the dream of my uncle's life," she said, "to collect all his scattered collections into one museum; all his purchases were made to that end, but he died without having even begun it."

"That is dreadful," said Humphrey; "it must be so terribly sad for a man to see his life slip from him without his having accomplished what he most cared for."

"I don't think my uncle felt it so," she answered; "his was a very happy life, and this unfulfilled intention

gave it a meaning and completed it. His real happiness lay in selecting and buying, and he would not have been content to do this without some ultimate object in view. But the practical carrying out of his scheme would have given him more trouble than pleasure, and, in fact, he constantly put it off till it was too late."

"But that is what seems to me so dreadful," said Humphrey. "There is something pitiful in a life so missing its highest aim, in being so resultless—long years of working to no end."

"Can one judge of a life in that way?" said Ersilia, flushing up with some displeasure perhaps. "My uncle's life was one amongst others—every one could not be so, and it would not satisfy every one; but I have always thought there was something very beautiful in his genuine love for beautiful things, and his perfect knowledge and judgment in such matters. And he always looked upon what he was doing as a means of ultimate good to others: if he deceived himself it was unconsciously. He had a rare simplicity of character."

"I beg your pardon," said Humphrey, "I did not know what I was talking about. I am always blundering out stupid opinions that are worth nothing when one comes to look at them, and now I have vexed you."

"Not at all," she answered, cordially; "I think your opinions are worth a great deal, and I dare say you are right in the abstract. I cannot judge of my uncle as I should of anyone else, I loved him too well. Perhaps, too, I was talking as much to myself as to you. Sometimes, you know, a chance word strikes into an old argument that one has fought out more than once, and then one cannot help fighting it out once more. Let us talk of something else. How does your picture get on?"

They were together and talking as in the summer days in the Pyrenees; a thrill of pleasure came over the lad, and his embarrassed self-consciousness passed away.

"My old picture?" he said. "That was no good at all. I saw that as soon as I came back. I have begun a new one; stay, I will show you the sketch."

He took a sketch-book from his pocket, and began turning it over.

"The subject is from Dante," he said, "it is where he sees Matilda gathering flowers beyond the stream in the forest. Mr. Fleming thinks the composition good."

"I like it very much too," said Ersilia, considering it, "but ought the ground to be covered with these autumn crocuses, Humphrey? I think they are spring flowers that are mentioned."

"I know," he answered, getting suddenly red, "that is only the first sketch, as it came into my head. It was that day in the forest. I was walking in front with Mademoiselle Mathilde, and I turned round, and saw you coming through the trees with your gown gathered up, and your hand full of flowers, and that gave me the first idea."

She sat musing for a while with the sketch-book open before her, then turning to the lad, "I want you to do me a kindness if you will, Humphrey," she said.

"Of course I will," he answered, "what is it?"

"It is this; I have a crayon sketch of my uncle when he was a young man; I have also a very much smaller one done by an artist friend of his shortly before his death, and I want an enlarged copy of this one to match the other which hangs in my dressing-room. Would you undertake to do it for me?"

"I will do my best," he answered, in a low voice. "Thank you." He took the proposition as he felt sure it was meant—as an act of oblivion and friendship. "I have forgotten your past folly," her kind voice and words seem to say, "we are friends and companions again as before; it rests with you that we remain so henceforward." She could not know that it was a cruel kindness, and that it had been better for him perhaps if a thousand miles had lain between them.

She began looking through a portfolio for the sketch.

"Here are some designs that Mr. Fleming has been making for my new library," she said, handing Humphrey some sheets of paper, "it will be lighted from

above, you see ; there will be book-cases to the right and left probably, and pictures at the further end. I do not see this drawing of which I was speaking, I think I must have left it in the next room. We will go and look."

She led the way into the drawing-room, and Humphrey followed her ; but it was not destined that the drawing should be found at that time, for as they entered at one door, Mrs. Grey and Charlotte came in at another.

CHAPTER XV.

A Beginning of Trouble.

MRS. GREY came in affable and dignified as ever, in a violet silk gown that seemed to illuminate the room. This lady's dresses, which were always perfectly fashionable and well made, rustled so much, and had so many flounces and trimmings, that she was apt to give one the impression of having on two or three gowns at once. Charlotte came slipping after, blushing and wide-eyed, looking just as she used to do at the Eaux-Chaudes. She was nearly swept away in her aunt's impressive entrance, and would have at once retreated to the chair nearest the door, but Ersilia kissed her, and took her hands in hers. "I am glad to see you again, my dear," she said, and still holding the little hand, she made the girl sit down by her on the sofa.

"This is a very great pleasure," Mrs. Grey said, as she seated herself, "I am so delighted to see you again, Princess, and Mr. Randolph too ; it is almost like one of our pleasant meetings in the Pyrenees. I heard of your return to Paris only yesterday, and I said at once to Rose that I should make a point of calling upon you to-day."

"You are very good," answered Ersilia, with the perfect simplicity of manner that used to baffle Mrs. Grey at the Eaux-Chaudes. "Your little girl is quite well, I hope?"

"She is quite well, thank you, but constantly occupied with her studies. I am anxious that she should have

every advantage that Paris can afford. She is at a drawing class this afternoon; her master was quite struck with the sketches she made in the Pyrenees; he says they are something quite remarkable for a young girl of her age. It may be foolish, but I own that I have an intense desire, I might almost say a longing, with which I am sure you artistic people will sympathize, to see my only child an artist—not professional, of course not professional—but an—an artist in short. I shall give her every opportunity of studying in these young days. Do you not think I am right, Princess?"

"I think," answered Ersilia, "if she has any real talent, it would be a great pity not to cultivate it."

"I am glad you agree with me. That is what I myself think—where there is talent, it should be cultivated. There are some young people, you know," with a glance at Charlotte, "who are so indifferent that it is impossible to do anything with them; but that is not the case with Rose—she is most industrious. I shall take her frequently to the Louvre. Mr. Randolph, you and I must arrange to go to the Louvre together some day; I should learn much from your experience, I am sure. And that reminds me to inquire whether Mr. Fleming has given up receiving on Sunday afternoons? I called at his studio last Sunday, but he was out."

"He has for the present," answered Humphrey, "he is very much occupied. I don't know if he intends to begin it again later."

"I quite long to see your picture again," said Mrs. Grey. "I remember thinking it quite—quite remarkable, if you will allow me to say so; have you sold it yet?"

"No," said Humphrey, bluntly, "I have painted it out."

"Painted it out!—painted over it, do you mean? My dear Mr. Randolph! But that is the very prodigality of genius; is it not, Princess?"

"I think it was very foolish," said Ersilia smiling, "what made you do that, Humphrey?"

"I hated the very sight of the thing," he answered,

"and I rubbed it all over one day. The canvas will do for something else."

"Was that the picture with the red sky?" Charlotte said timidly, as her aunt went on talking to Ersilia. "I liked that picture, Mr. Randolph."

"Did you?" he answered, "then I am sorry I destroyed it—at least no, I am not sorry, for you ought not to like anything so bad."

"I never can understand anything about pictures," said Charlotte rather ruefully. "Aunt Maria knows so much about them, and is so fond of them, and I never can care about them as she does."

"I am delighted to hear it," answered Humphrey with great sincerity, "then we can talk of something else. What did you do after we left the Eaux-Chaudes? Did you go anywhere else?"

"No, we came straight back to Paris; you know we had been everywhere before. It was very dull after you left, Mr. Randolph, as I knew it would be. I wish that you could have stayed, or that we could all have gone somewhere together."

"We did not go very far," said Humphrey, smiling, "Mr. Fleming was obliged to return to Paris sooner than he expected, so we did not see much of the Pyrenees after all."

"You did not see much," cried Mrs. Grey, who had the faculty of hearing and talking at the same time, "that was really a pity, Mr. Randolph. I am happy to say that we were able to do a great deal—not to go *everywhere*, of course—but still to do a great deal. For my own part, I should have liked to explore every nook and corner, had that been possible, but the Pyrenees are of such very great extent."

"I don't know that I should care to do that if it were possible," said Humphrey, "I always like to leave something for another time. Half the charm of a place is gone for me when I know it thoroughly. Don't you know what I mean?" he said, turning to Ersilia. "If I am in a wood, I never care to walk straight through to

the other side ; I like to imagine that it extends indefinitely, and that I might go on losing my way in it forever."

"Yes, I understand," she answered, "but I am not sure that I agree with you. I like to know all this is within my reach, though I also like to feel that there is a beyond that I do not know. I should have been glad to see more of the Pyrenees, but, as you know," she said, turning to Mrs. Grey, "we went there in the first instance on account of my aunt's health, and had to leave suddenly at last."

"I know—most sad. That excellent Mademoiselle de Brisac ! I was so sorry to hear that she is out to-day, but I hope to see her before long. She is the most charming person—a little abrupt at times, perhaps, but with something quite—quite charming about her. You are not going, Mr. Randolph," as Humphrey rose and took up his hat, "I have a hundred things to say to you—if I could only recollect—"

"I am very sorry," he answered, "but I must go, I have an engagement at five o'clock."

"Well, we shall soon meet again, I have no doubt. Shall I see you at the Embassy to-night ? Are you going to Lady C——'s next Thursday ? Do not forget that my At Homes begin on Wednesday fortnight ; I shall hope often to see you. I do not know whether it is the same with you, Princess, but I find that, though the season has not yet begun, my engagements are quite numberless."

Humphrey walked away from his cousin's house with mixed feelings, that he did not care to analyse. It seemed enough for the moment that his old friendly relations with Ersilia were resumed. The old days were to begin again then, with all their old sweetness and bitterness ? Well, better so, he thought, than to be estranged from her, to be banished from her presence, to be treated with coldness and scorn. Does the man fevered with thirst push from him the offered cup because it is half empty ? Not though he knows the insufficient draught may urge his thirst to madness.

The lad's engagement was to dine with a friend, and go to the theatre afterwards. The play was dull, and they came away before it was finished, and Humphrey, who had left a sketch-book of which he was in want at his master's studio, went round there to fetch it before going home.

The studio, as he expected, was still lighted up, for Mr. Fleming was in the habit of working late, and he found him there now, hunting through a pile of dusty portfolios.

"I was just wishing for you, Humphrey," he said, "are you in a hurry or can you help me? I want to find some studies of olive-trees that I have somewhere, I know, but I cannot lay my hand upon them."

"I saw them the other day," said Humphrey, "they were in one of these drawers, I think; I will look."

He went up to a black and gold cabinet, fitted with shallow drawers which he began to turn out. As he replaced the drawings again, one by one, he said, half-laughing, "I saw Mrs. Grey to-day, Sir. She wanted to know when you would be at home on Sunday afternoons again."

"Yes, your cousin told me she had been calling," said Mr. Fleming, stooping preoccupied over his portfolios.

"Have you seen her since the morning?" asked Humphrey, half wondering.

"Yes, I have been spending the evening there." Then standing up and laughing, "Mademoiselle de Brisac was in despair at not having seen you to-day, Humphrey," he went on. "'That good, that excellent young man,' she said, 'I have missed him extremely. Tell him to come and see me constantly; I have had no one to laugh at or to laugh at me since we were all together. Tell him to come in his oldest coat, and not to cut his hair unless he likes.'"

Humphrey did not answer, he had turned away at the beginning of Mr. Fleming's speech with a sudden jealous pang. It so happened that this was the first time since her return to Paris that Mr. Fleming had spent the evening with Ersilia; it was perfectly natural that he

should have done so now, that he should constantly do so in the future, but somehow Humphrey had never thought of it. He had fancied that the old days, with their constant intercourse, their sweet familiarity could begin again. A vision of long days and evenings in which he could have no part rose before him. He went on looking at the drawings without seeing them.

"Stop, there they are," said Mr. Fleming, "those on the grey paper that you have in your hand. Thank you, my boy, just pin them on to that board, will you? and turn the picture round to the light. I want to work at it to-night, for I shall be busy to-morrow."

Humphrey did as he was requested, whilst Mr. Fleming took an empty canvas from where it was leaning with a number of others against the wall, and set it up upon an easel.

"Come as early as you can to-morrow morning, Humphrey," he said, "I have sent word to Guiseppe to be here at nine instead of eleven. Your cousin is coming to sit to me in the afternoon, I hope."

"Are you going to paint her portrait, Sir?"

"Yes," said Mr. Fleming, stepping back from the easel and considering the canvas. "By the by, there is a drawing for you there, Humphrey, that she asked me to bring you; she says she told you about it."

"I know," answered the lad. "She wants an enlarged copy."

"The other drawing is there also, that you may see the required size. If you have any difficulty with it, let me know, and I will help you. It would be a pity not to preserve the likeness exactly, and that sort of *débonnaire* expression is not so easy to catch as a more decided one."

"Thank you, Sir, but I would rather do it myself, if I can," answered Humphrey, jealously, "I will take it home with me, it will do for evening work."

"Just as you like, but don't sit up working too late at night, my boy, and be here early to-morrow morning."

Humphrey had a long walk before him. On his first

arrival in Paris, there had been no room vacant in the house in which Mr. Fleming occupied a small apartment, nor could he find anything in that neighborhood to suit his limited means. But he presently heard from a fellow-artist, of a room in the Rue de Seine, and though the distance from the studio was inconvenient, the boy, who was new to Paris, enjoyed his daily walks across the river, and liked his new quarters, which were so much nearer the old city (there was an old city in those days) than the Rue de Clichy. Paris was new to him—sometimes, even now, when in the early summer dawn, he sees the sky flush behind the domes and towers, and the light begins to flow along the river and the bridges and the silent spaces of the great city, when on some blazing noon-day, he crosses the Place du Carrousel and turns into the Louvre, when he lingers on the quays over some old book-stall, or stands for a moment to gaze on the sparkling view where, from amongst roofs and trees and spires, the towers of Notre Dame rise to form the centre of one of the most admirable pictures in the world, sometimes, I say, among these and a hundred other scenes, familiar to him now through the varied experiences of five-and-twenty years, some sound, some passing breath of air, some merest sensation reveals again the days when they were still new to him, when, before a slim lad, life and art, youth and love, seemed to roll themselves out immeasurably.

Humphrey, then, who spent his days for the most part at his master's studio, found no fault with the situation of the room which he had now occupied for nearly a twelvemonth, though it was at the very top of a lofty house standing at the corner of a narrow cross street. It was a house full of lodgers of every degree, and, as on this evening the lad was mounting the last flight of ill-lighted stairs that led from one dingy landing to another, he saw before him a thin, white-haired man, of middle height, who appeared to walk with difficulty, and whose halting steps obliged Humphrey to check his own more rapid ones. There was nothing very remarkable in the

man's appearance, but Humphrey had hitherto, with the exception of a little old *ouvrière*, been the sole occupant of the upper story, and he began to speculate now on the possibility of this stranger being a visitor to himself, even at this late hour of the night.

He was not left long in doubt. The man, who looked like a gentleman, though he was shabbily dressed, turned to the left on reaching the top landing, and taking a key from his pocket, began to fit into a door facing that which led into Humphrey's room on the right. He was awkward apparently, or perhaps unable to see in the dim lamp-light, for, after fumbling at the lock for a moment, the key fell to the ground. He was stooping with an effort to pick it up, when Humphrey, who had been pausing at his own door, crossed the landing and came to his assistance.

"Can I help you?" he said in French.

The stranger turned and looked at the lad, then lifted his hat with a perfectly courteous and unembarrassed air. "Thank you," he said, "I shall be much obliged to you. This lock is rather stiff, and I am a martyr to rheumatic gout."

Humphrey turned the key and opened the door; he had a momentary glimpse of a firelit room, with a screen drawn across the middle; then the stranger passed in, bowed once more, and the door was closed.

It is in the nature of things that some of the most momentous introductions of our lives should be accomplished without emphasis, only to be remembered—if remembered at all—when after events have given them significance. This was Randolph's first meeting with a man who was to be a strong influence in his life of those days, and one stronger still on the destinies of those dearest to him; but at the time he saw nothing in it but the merest passing courtesy, which, pre-occupied with his own troubles, he had already forgotten by the time he had opened his own door and entered his apartment.

It was a large bare room with sloping walls. A table littered with drawings, an easel, a heap of books piled

together, and a bed in a recess were amongst the principal articles of furniture ; the lad's tastes were simple, nor, indeed, had he in any case, much money to spend in luxuries. But—*qu'on est bien à vingt ans, etc.*—Humphrey desired no better accommodation, and the gloom on his face as he entered his room to-night, had nothing to do with the uninviting aspect of bare walls and an unpolished floor.

He lighted his lamp and made up his fire, for, late as it was, he intended to work, then unrolling the drawings Ersilia had sent him, he began at once to prepare a sheet of paper of the requisite size. But when it was ready, and he had set to work, he found that he could not draw a line to any purpose. All the events of the day rolled themselves out before him once more. Voices and words and looks that during the last few weeks had seemed to be fading into echoes from a past already remote, for it was separated from him by a catastrophe, were once more present and ringing in his ears. He sat brooding over his drawing for a while, then threw down his pencil, and walked with impatient steps to the window.

It was a clear night. A thousand stars glittered in a dark sky above the thousand chimney pots and roofs that spread themselves below ; here and there a light, late as Humphrey's own, glimmered in some window, but, for the most part, all was dark and silent—the unresting silence of a great city. That sense of a universal life breathing and sentient around which to the young is like a mighty pulse beating in unison with the bound of their own impetuous blood, set Humphrey's heart throbbing now as it had done many a time before ; but it brought with it to-night a new pain, a contrasted sense, as it were, of his own individuality, too acute to be borne. He put his hands to his head and turned abruptly away. "I am a fool," he cried, "a fool, a fool ! Why did she ask me to return ?"

It might, in fact, have been better if Ersilia, in her inexperience and noble self-reproach, had not on that

sunny morning amongst the mountains urged Humphrey to return home. His first impulse, which had been not unmixed with manly resolution, had been a wise one, though he had shown little wisdom in acting on it. It would have been better for him to break away from everything associated with his dream of passion and mad jealousy. Left alone with Mr. Fleming after Ersilia's departure for La Chênaie, better thoughts had, indeed, made themselves felt. His master's complete unconsciousness of all that had been passing in his mind, the return to their old familiar habits of intercourse, the change of scene, all had helped to arouse in him a generous sympathy with Mr. Fleming's happiness, which showed itself in an extraordinary goodness and kindness to himself, to stir in him a longing to become worthier of the affection so freely given him by the two people he most revered on earth. "Who was he," he said again and again, with an enthusiasm and humility that he is glad to remember now, "who was he that he should be permitted even to approach two souls such as these, who, in their differing strength and greatness and genius, seemed to have grown apart in the world, to meet at last and form a perfect whole?"

Such were the better thoughts which, could the lad have left behind him for a time old ties and associations, would, I think, have presently prevailed. But to maintain a changed thought amidst unchanged surroundings is, as we all know, one of the hardest struggles in life—harder, perhaps, than its converse. All that had gone to make the intensest life Humphrey had ever known, had returned to him with Ersilia, and now already on this first evening after he had seen her, the old passion and bitterness seemed rising again with redoubled force after their brief lull. One of the hardest struggles in life, I say again, to youth and inexperience, is the adjustment of the mind, unassisted by outward change, to new conditions in which it has henceforth to live. When familiar voices and familiar phrases sound in our ears, when familiar faces smile upon us, it is inevitable that

we should slip back to our former habits of thought, and it is the obligation laid upon us to recover ourselves again and again from these, to realize that between us and them lies a gulf impassable as death, that results in the terrible wrestling in which victory is certain only when we see our keenest hopes and passions dead for ever at our feet.

It was upon such a struggle as this that Randolph was entering. As he writes now, the boy's conflicts and darkness and despair seem to rise again and touch his heart with something of their old anguish. He will pass over them so far as may be in silence. They are but the ashes of a passion that was to burn fiercely for a while, and then to lose itself, as he likes to think, in a nobler and more unselfish love.

CHAPTER XVI.

Golden Hours.

MR. FLEMING and Ersilia were not to be married till the early spring. Ersilia, who had promised to spend the winter with Mademoiselle Mathilde, would not now leave the old lady to a loneliness that she would feel on her first return to Paris after years of absence. By the end of a few months she would, it might be hoped, be so far accustomed to her new life, which indeed was the one most congenial to her, as to feel reconciled to the loss of Ersilia, on whose sweet helpfulness she had learned to depend in a hundred ways. In the mean time the engagement was hardly known, for Ersilia had few personal friends, and Mademoiselle Mathilde, who could not bear the thought of the coming separation, always tried to ignore it as much as possible.

It was in the days that followed that the Princess Zaraikine's portrait, of which mention has more than once been made, was painted, and the four or five people who had so often been together in the Pyrenees, not unfrequently met again in Mr. Fleming's studio. Humphrey of course was there, and Charlotte often accompanied Ersilia, for the girl, who had skilful fingers for all kinds of needlework, liked to bring her sewing or embroidery and sit stitching silently in a corner whilst the painting was going on. Later in the afternoon Mademoiselle Mathilde would appear, and occasionally Mrs. Grey herself would come sweeping in to bear away the reluctant Charlotte. Mrs. Grey in Paris was not indeed altogether the same as Mrs. Grey at the Eaux-Chaudes. Her engagements were so numerous that, as she explained,

it was only a few minutes she could find to bestow upon us in the studio ; but though comparatively haughty, she had yet not forgotten how to be affable. She invariably reminded Humphrey that they were to spend a day together at the Louvre ; with Ersilia she conversed of the fashionable world, whilst her remarks on Mr. Fleming's pictures at once exasperated him and made him happy for the remainder of the day.

"I delight in symbolism," she used to say. "I think all art should be symbolic, Mr. Fleming ; it should appeal through the eye to the higher sensibilities. That is what always charms me in your pictures ; they are so—so ideal ; there is nothing realistic about them. This for instance appears to me perfect, quite perfect, except—might I venture to make one very small critical remark ? Hypercritical you will perhaps term it, but—this violin ; are you sure that violins were invented at that period ? I had fancied that they were of later date."

"Turn the pictures to the wall, Humphrey," Mr. Fleming would say when Mrs. Grey was gone, "I am glad they have no ears to hear with, poor things ; how they would suffer if they had !"

Mrs. Grey, however, did not often appear, and these November afternoons passed one like another. Mr. Fleming and Ersilia talked, Humphrey worked silently at his easel, and perhaps—for the lad as I have said, was of a silent nature—no one guessed that he was absorbed in anything but the picture before him. Sometimes in an interval of rest, Ersilia would correct the proof sheets of her volume of MSS. now passing through the press, or Charlotte sing one of her clear-voiced little songs. Then, as the early dusk fell, and Mr. Fleming and Humphrey laid aside their brushes, Ersilia would go to the piano and play in the firelight, a clatter of cups and saucers would be heard, and old Marguerite the cook, wondering but gracious over these unusual proceedings, would enter with a tea-tray. As Randolph looks up now, he seems to see it all again—Ersilia smiling and pouring out tea at the little table set near the window, Mr. Fleming standing in front

of his easel considering his afternoon's work, Charlotte flitting about with the pretty yellow hair that Humphrey once persuaded her to let him paint for the head of an angel, who still soars on an old canvas in yonder corner. It is hours such as these that leave golden memories in the lives of happy people—memories of happy voices and sweet laughter that ring down the long years as the fire brightens and the night looks blackly in at the window, of opening doors that admit best loved faces, of clasping hands, and eyes that meet to read each other's thoughts. If to Randolph that time brought with it a pain from which he presently broke away, yet it is with a thrill as from vanished bliss that he recalls it now. For some happiness there is, which, only to witness, seems to make life fuller and wider, the mere remembrance of which stays with us, like the scent of flowers we have known in our childhood, a hint of infinite possibilities. Such, I think, is the happiness of a noble soul that finds its chief good in submission to a genius and experience that it feels to be higher than its own, of a sensitive and impressionable nature filled with the joy of a sweet and cheerful steadfastness unknown to itself. . . . Randolph likes to remember Ersilia as she was in those days when every hour brought some new experience to give new meaning and beauty to her life. He likes to remember Ersilia, but he finds it hard to write of Mr. Fleming even now. Once only in that lonely life, averse to common joys, ruled by the alternating rapture and despair of imagination, once only, perhaps, there dawned an exquisite reality—to pass again into a darkness whose intensity was measured by that of the lost delight.

There was a less ideal happiness which it might have cheered Humphrey to contemplate, had he been capable at this time of receiving any such consolation. Setting aside Ersilia's approaching marriage, Mademoiselle Mathilde was in a state of radiant satisfaction. M. de Florian had left her a handsome legacy and the use of an apartment in his Paris house, and the old lady, who had had but a small fortune of her own, was better off now than she had

ever been in her life before. She had acceded more or less willingly to her brother-in-law's earnest request that she would live with him in Rome, when Ersilia, as a young girl, had returned to seek his protection ; but she had naturally longed for a home of her own, and now, although she and Ersilia still lived together, she had her apartment on the other side of the courtyard, in which to receive company and give parties after her own fashion. Already she was making preparations for the coming winter, renewing old friendships, seeking out half-forgotten acquaintances, refurnishing her rooms, of which the furniture, like Ersilia's, was worn and old-fashioned—a fact to which, unlike Ersilia, Mademoiselle Mathilde was by no means indifferent. It was generally after some shopping expedition that she made her appearance in the studio, and she used to come up from the carriage laden with parcels of every size and description, tea-cups and rugs, foot-stools and screens, patterns of chintz, and silk, and damask, on each and all of which she was anxious to have an opinion. By the middle of December everything was to be ready, and the rooms opened for her first party.

“I could wish,” she used to say, “to revive some of the glories of the old *salons*, the traditions even of which are almost lost in these days. I flatter myself that I am not without some of the qualities indispensable for such an enterprise, that I have the art of collecting around me people of talent and *esprit*, and that I possess the real secret of setting everyone at his ease, by making others converse without saying more than enough myself. You, Ersilia, I expect to be invaluable to me. Your conversation is not all that I could wish ; on the few occasions that we were together in society at Rome I remarked that you would sometimes sit almost silent till some subject arose that interested you, and that then you would talk as if there were nothing else worth thinking of in the world. A graceful and general interest in every topic, however trivial, is what is required, not an absorbing and exclusive interest in one. But this need not distress you, my dear child, for you have a way of looking and moving

like no one else, that is enough for one person, and I can keep the conversation in my own hands. It is all I am good for in these days, but to talk well is an accomplishment that every one does not possess. That excellent Mrs. Grey, she is a delightful person in every respect, and I have no doubt imagines that her conversation is charming, but she has not an idea of what conversation really means. She thinks of what she is saying instead of what she is talking about, and shows that she does, which is worse. Mr. Humphrey, you may come to my parties if you will talk, but you have grown more silent than ever lately, and as I have often said, I will have no glum Englishmen in my rooms standing in corners and blocking up the doorways."

"I will do my best, Mademoiselle," Humphrey answered, trying to rouse himself, "but I would rather find out your secret for making other people talk; it must save one a great deal of trouble."

"There you are wrong; it is extremely difficult, but it is not the business of a young man like you," answered Mademoiselle Mathilde, "if everybody did that we should be no further on than we were before. You have to respond to other people's attention and not look bored when you are spoken to. You may come, and I have told Mrs. Grey that she is to bring little Charlotte. Where is the child? Oh, I remember, the *bonne* fetched her half an hour ago. Yes, she may come; she is improved lately, it is the air of Paris, I suppose. She looks more alive and ties her bows straighter. And that reminds me, Mr. Humphrey, a new coat, I beg of you; not that old one you are cleaning your palette in."

"It is a very good coat," said the lad giving the sleeve a rub. He had a real liking, philosophical or otherwise, for old clothes, and a contempt that was not all affectation for every description of finery. "But I won't come in it to your parties, Mademoiselle," he went on, "I promise to try and look my very best on those occasions."

"And your best is not at all bad," answered Mademoiselle Mathilde, nodding, as she prepared to leave the

room, "you are coming with me, are you not, Ersilia? I want to call at a hundred places on our way home. I must order a new flower-stand, and I want your opinion on the color of the drawing-room curtains by lamp-light——"

Mademoiselle Mathilde was right in what she had said about Charlotte. Humphrey, painting silently in his corner, noticed that some change, hard to define, had come over the girl. She was still a very simple and foolish little Charlotte with not much to say for herself, and more timid than ever; any sudden voice, or opening door would make her start, and blush and tremble. But there was more purpose and animation about her; she laughed and talked more freely; her ready tears had almost ceased to flow; one would have said that in the dull, imprisoning limits of her life, some window had opened, some hope had dawned.

One day Humphrey asked her about her life in Paris.

"You don't find it as dull as you thought you would, do you?" he said.

"Yes—no, I don't know," answered Charlotte, startled and confused, and coloring very much, "that is, there is—there are some things—I cannot tell you; it is very dull at home."

"What do you do with yourself all day?" asked Humphrey; "do you go out much? That is never dull in Paris; there is always so much to see."

"Is there?" said Charlotte, "but I generally go out with Aunt Maria, and we don't go to see anything; we pay visits. Aunt Maria says it is time for me to be introduced, and I am to go to all the balls this winter."

"Well, you will like that, will you not?" said the lad.

"No, I don't think I shall," answered Charlotte; "it tires me to dance, and Aunt Maria always tells me I am awkward. I don't think I shall like it much."

"That is a pity," said Humphrey, "I should have thought you liked dancing, I cannot fancy that you would ever be awkward, Miss Grey. What do you like doing?" he added with a smile.

"I don't know," said Charlotte, frankly; then, after some reflection, "I like being with the Princess Zaraikine," she said. "I am always happy when she comes to fetch me; she is so good, and wise, and beautiful, I think there is no one like her in the world. And I like coming here because you are all so kind; and I like going out with Henriette sometimes in the Tuileries Gardens, when it is warm and sunny, and I can sit and listen to the music, and watch the babies and the children playing about. I am so fond of little children, and you are too, Mr. Randolph, are you not? You have so many drawings of them in your sketch-book."

"I like drawing them," answered Humphrey, "and I like them for themselves, too, sometimes," he added, looking down at Charlotte's upturned little face. It was impossible to think of Charlotte as anything but a child. Mr. Fleming, who was fond of her, and treated her with an unvarying kindness, used to say that there was something pathetic about her—as if she had been dropped into the world and lost her way there.

"The evenings are the worst," Charlotte continued, "for when Aunt Maria is at home, we all sit and work, and Rose and I read a big book of history by turns; and if I listen, it sends me to sleep; and if I don't listen, I don't know what we have been reading about, and Aunt Maria is angry."

"That is a hard case," said Humphrey, laughing, "I should always go to sleep if I were you; you could not be expected to remember anything then."

"Do not listen to him, Charlotte," said Ersilia, smiling, as she came up to them. "You know," she said, smoothing back the girl's shining hair, "we agreed that you are going to read all sorts of books, and learn about all sorts of things, that you may be a wise woman some day."

"But I don't know how," said Charlotte, looking helpless and frightened. Like all people of a diffident nature, she preferred the chance of being blamed for not attempting a thing, to that of being blamed for carelessness or

dulness if she did not accomplish it. "I wish I were wise," she went on, "I wish I was like Rose. She is very clever and always remembers things, but I never can do anything."

"Indeed, I think you can," said Ersilia, "you learn languages easily, and you can sing, and embroider beautifully. You have learnt all those new stitches I showed you, and can do them better than I can now. See, here is a pattern that Mr. Fleming has been designing for the cushion you wished to work; you will like to do that, will you not? And I do not know why you should not learn other things as well—things that would show you that we need never find life quite dull and uninteresting, because there is always so much in it that is beautiful."

Ersilia had that large faith in human nature which springs from a loving heart and wide imaginative sympathies; but she had also, at that time, her share of the inexperience of youth, and her faith took the form of believing in the latent power of everyone to accept those truths which she herself held to be amongst the best and noblest in life. It is a belief to which all high natures cling—only after many failures, perhaps, do they learn to exchange it for the yet larger faith in the differing capacity for goodness in every human soul, and recognize that it is in searching out and discovering this that the truest wisdom lies. Our dim little Charlotte, at any rate, had no strength to follow in the path along which Ersilia would willingly have led her. She loved the Princess Zaraikine and clung to her as to a superior being, one who had power to bring change and light into her dull round of cheerless days, but she felt vaguely that she was out of sympathy with her, and the fact may explain how it was that Ersilia was not at this time a stronger influence in the girl's life. Something there was at work in Charlotte, something that would often set her musing with her embroidery lying neglected before her, but it was not Ersilia's presence. What could she be thinking of? Humphrey sometimes could not help speculating.

He was not left to speculate long. About this time

he began to come much less to the studio ; only a few days after the above conversation, one of his old London fellow-students passing through Paris on his way to Rome, gave him an excuse for absenting himself, and he hardly saw Charlotte for a time, but he was destined to become before long, in a wholly unlooked-for way, intimately acquainted with her affairs.

CHAPTER XVII.

Charlotte Again.

ONE dark December evening, about eight o'clock, Humphrey was mounting the stairs to his room at a somewhat less rapid pace than usual. The lad's heart was heavy ; he had been dining at a restaurant with some acquaintances for whose society he did not care, and he had left them soon after dinner on the plea that he had some work that he must finish at home ; but the work itself had but little interest for him, and he was half repenting his decision as he thought of the solitary hours to be spent in a room where of late gloomy thoughts and moods seemed always standing ready on the threshold to receive him. Humphrey's heart was often heavy in those days, when as it seemed to him, through no special volition on his part, but through a natural sequence of emotions he was gradually drifting away from his old life, and from all that had made that life worth living.

The staircase, as I have said, was ill-lighted, but a dim oil-lamp burned here and there, and as Humphrey reached the second landing, he was arrested by seeing a little figure come flying down the upper flight of stairs. It was a girl, running so impetuously that her foot slipped, and she only saved herself from falling down the last step by catching hold of the balustrade. As she paused to take breath and recover herself, she looked round with a startled glance ; a pair of frightened dark eyes met Humphrey's, and he recognized Charlotte Grey.

"Miss Grey!" he said, in extreme astonishment.

She started and turned quite white at the sound of his voice, shrinking against the wall, with her hands

pressed back, as if she would willingly have shrunk out of sight altogether. There was a moment's pause.

"Did I startle you?" said Humphrey at last, "I am very sorry."

"No, oh no," she answered, "only I did not know who it was—I did not expect to see you here."

"Don't you know that I live in this house?" said the lad, "I have a room up at the top. Surely you are not here all alone?" he added, unable to conceal the surprise that he felt at seeing the girl there at such an hour.

"Oh, no, Henriette is there, she said she would wait for me outside," she answered; then looking at him with eyes still wide with fright, "do you live here?" she said, "in a room at the top of the house?"

A door opened just behind them, and a man brushed past, turning again to look at the two as he made his way down stairs. Humphrey felt that they could not stand talking there any longer.

"Don't you think we had better go?" he said, "let me see you down stairs; this house is full of people, and there are always a good many about."

She took his arm, and they went down stairs silently. In the covered courtyard below they found a white-capped maid, who came up to them.

"*Allons*, Mademoiselle, we must make haste," she said sharply, staring at Humphrey as she spoke. "Mademoiselle Rose will be back by half-past nine, and that dress of Madame's must be finished before she comes in to-night."

"Are you going home?" said Humphrey to Charlotte, "you are not going to walk, surely. Have you no carriage here? Let me call you one; it is much too long a walk for you to the Rue du Helder at this hour of the evening."

It was dark and drizzling outside. Without further question Humphrey hailed a passing *remise*, and put Charlotte and the maid into it.

"Thank you," said Charlotte, "but I would rather have walked. I—I want to speak to you. Please come

too," she went on in a distressed voice, as he shut the carriage door and wished her good-night, "please, I wish you would come too."

Humphrey hesitated, but at that moment the horse gave a start and a plunge, the maid gave a scream, and Charlotte looked frightened out of her wits again.

"I will see you safe home," he said. He jumped on the box beside the driver, and they went rattling along the lighted streets and quays. But when they stopped at the Rue du Helder, and Humphrey would again have said good-night, Charlotte still looked at him with imploring eyes.

"Please come in—only for one minute," she said, and without waiting for an answer, she ran quickly upstairs.

Humphrey could only follow. Mrs. Grey's apartment was on the second floor; the door was already open, and Humphrey passed through the entry into a small room where there were lights and a fire, and which opened into a larger drawing-room beyond. Charlotte had disappeared, but in a moment she returned without her bonnet and cloak, which she had hurried to take off. Her color had come back, but she still had a scared look, like a child suddenly found out in a fault.

"I only wanted to ask you—please, if you don't mind," she began, confusedly, and without any preamble, "if you won't tell any one that I have been out to-night, only Henriette knows, and she will not tell."

"Of course, I won't speak of anything you don't want mentioned," said Humphrey, then getting rather confused in his turn, he said awkwardly enough. "I hope you won't mind my telling you, Miss Grey, that I don't think that house is the sort of place you should go about in alone in the evening. You know a big Paris house of that kind is like a street. There are always people about, and you might be annoyed or frightened."

"Oh, I know," said Charlotte, with widening eyes. "I was frightened; but Henriette said she could not go up all those stairs, when there was not even a chair to

sit down on at the top, so I was obliged to go alone. But I was very glad when I saw you, though I was startled at first. I did not know that you lived there ; I never met you before."

"Before?" said the lad.

"Yes, I have been there twice before ; not for myself, you know, it was to see some one who is very ill—but I mustn't tell you about him, it is a secret," said Charlotte, not without an air of importance. "At first, when you said that you lived at the top of the house too, I was afraid that you might know all about it, but I see that you don't."

"I don't, indeed," said Humphrey. He stood considering for a while ; into what mischief was the girl running her foolish little head? He remembered her troubles, on which he had sometimes speculated, at the Eaux-Chaudes, and could not help connecting them with her proceedings now. "If you have a friend living in the same house that I am in," was all he could think of to say at last, "perhaps I could be of some use to you, if you would tell me how."

"But he said I was to tell no one anything about him," said Charlotte with a perplexed look, "and he is ill and so poor, and there is no one but me to go and see him—he used to be so kind to me—" she ended with a sob, and the tears that had gathered in her eyes whilst she was speaking, began to roll down her cheeks.

"I should like you to know about it," she said, presently, "but it is a great secret that he is there at all. He asked me if I could keep a secret, and I said 'yes,' and so I can. I didn't mean to tell you, I couldn't help meeting you on the stairs, could I?"

"Of course not, and you have told me nothing that need distress you," said Humphrey, trying to comfort the poor little bewildered girl, who had begun to sob again. "Don't cry, please," he said, "only tell me if I can't be of some use to you. Does no one know anything about this who could help you—not the—Princess Zaraikine, or anyone?"

"No, oh, no!" said Charlotte, looking frightened, "he said I was not to tell her, or anyone, that he is here. He didn't say you, though," she added, "he doesn't know about you, and perhaps, as you live in the same house, you could go and see him, and that might do him good."

"I would go with pleasure if you think your friend would like it," said Humphrey, really anxious to help the girl, but not clearly seeing his way to it, "only—I don't want to learn your secrets, you know, and I think you would do better to tell them to some one else; to your aunt or to the Princess Zaraikine, who would give you much better advice, if you wanted it, than I can."

"But it isn't a secret any longer, if you know he is there," said Charlotte, rather ruefully. "I didn't mean to tell you but I don't think he will mind your knowing, because you are kind and will be able to help him. I have known him for a long time. He used to give me lessons in French and German when we were in Brussels last winter, but after we went away he was very ill and had to give up teaching. Then he got better and came to Paris, but now he is ill again, and cannot give lessons, or write, or do anything to earn money."

Charlotte, in spite of her remorse at having betrayed the secret, was evidently not without a sense of pleasure at having something to tell, and some one to tell it to; but, towards the end of her speech, the corners of her mouth began to fall, and the tears came tumbling down again, whilst Humphrey stood puzzling over this perplexing confidence.

"How did you know he was in Paris?" he said at last. "Did he come here?"

"No, he wrote to me—he used to write to me sometimes. I had a letter from him at the Eaux-Chaudes, but I told the Princess Zaraikine about it one evening, and she said that I ought not to have letters that Aunt Maria knew nothing about. I never thought of that before, he was so kind to me. But I didn't write to him

again after she said that ; only when I knew he was in Paris, and so ill and poor, I could not help going to see him. He has only one room to live in, and no money to pay the doctor or anything."

"Surely he did not take mon——," Humphrey began in indignation, but checked himself.

"No, oh no!" cried the girl hastily, startled by his tone, and blushing scarlet with some consciousness or embarrassment that made her look less childish than Humphrey had ever seen her before. Was she speaking the truth! No one, I believe, ever knew the whole truth of this story, of which Charlotte's account now was filling the lad with a sense of wrath and repulsion towards the chief actor in it such as he had never felt before. Charlotte was too simple and guileless as her present conduct proved to imagine or carry out any preconcerted scheme with success ; but she had not the clear, instinctive sense of truth which belongs to stronger and nobler natures, perhaps, than hers, and moreover she had that tendency to concealment which is the inevitable result of harshness on a timid mind. No one, I say, ever knew the whole truth, not even Ersilia, though Charlotte had confided some of her troubles to her at the Eaux-Chaudes—certainly not Humphrey. And yet the story, as he learned it, partly now from the girl herself, partly later on from other sources, was a common-place one enough.

During the previous winter in Brussels, Mrs. Grey, always dutifully intent on improving her niece's puzzled little brain, had engaged for her instruction a certain Monsieur Rossel, who had been recommended to her, as a competent teacher of such French and German literature as was suitable for a young lady of Charlotte's age and position. Rose did not share these studies, and Mrs. Grey being, as we know, a person of many and varied engagements, Charlotte generally took her lessons protected by the presence of her maid Henriette. One day, Monsieur Rossel coming in, found Charlotte in floods of tears over a copy-book whose pages were sullied by nothing but the great drops that were fast inundating it. Monsieur

Rossel, imperturbable setter of Procrustean tasks to a dozen young ladies in turn, had left the girl a lesson to prepare altogether beyond her powers. Her aunt, coming in and finding it undone, had scolded her, Monsieur Rossel was coming and would scold her more, and all, so far as she could see, for no preventable fault on her part. Life had thus suddenly become a problem altogether too sad and too perplexing for our little Charlotte.

Here was a pathetic tragedy for an imperturbable master of literature to fall upon! Monsieur Rossel, who was not really imperturbable, and a teacher through circumstances only, not through vocation, was apparently equal to the task of comforting his little pupil, who, as we know, was fair and pretty, and had simple, winning looks for those who were kind to her. He assured her that nothing in the world could be of less consequence than her lesson, that he would explain to her aunt that it was only he, and not she at all who had been to blame, and that she should have no difficulties with him for the future. Such a solution of her insoluble problem seemed like a dream to Charlotte, accustomed to find herself always in the wrong without knowing why. From that day, Monsieur Rossel had all the gratitude, and more than gratitude perhaps, of a little heart in which the most trivial occurrences assumed the proportions of momentous events. The master seems to have kept his promise, and to have troubled the girl with no more difficulties. The formal lessons in French and German literature were exchanged for instructive conversations in those languages, and it was probably in the course of these, that Monsieur Rossel presently began to hint at fallen fortunes and unmerited sufferings; and Charlotte, though innocent of romances, had doubtless heard enough of Polish Counts and Royal adventurers, for her small imagination to begin working. Who knows what else? Was Monsieur Rossel on his side attracted by this simple, tender little heart, which was ready to respond to the first appeals to its affection and compassion? Something he seems to have said of a happier

future in store for her if she would trust to him, of a home far removed from all harshness ; but Charlotte, unused to friendly words, may easily have interpreted commonplace expressions amiss. Who shall say ? The girl, as everyone knew, would have a large fortune when she came of age, and in the meantime was supplied by her guardians, as Humphrey had happened incidentally to learn, with a more than usually liberal allowance. This part of the story, which came only through her own confused statements, was never quite cleared up.

At the end of the season, Mrs. Grey left Brussels, and darkness fell once more upon Charlotte, a darkness hardly relieved by M. Rossel's occasional letters.

"When I heard from him at the Eaux-Chaudes that he was so ill, I was very unhappy," she said, "I thought that he was going to die, and that I should never see him again ; and then when I mightn't answer his letter, that he would think I had forgotten him. But at last I got a letter to say he was in Paris, and to ask me to go and see him."

"The sneaking scoundrel !" Humphrey had nearly said aloud, but checked himself as he met Charlotte's appealing eyes. "I will go and see him," he said instead, "you say he lives in the same house that I do ; will you tell me where I shall find him ?"

"He lives on the top story, the first floor to the left of the staircase," replied Charlotte. Then beginning to quiver a little. "Do you think he will be angry with me for telling you ?" she said. "Please, I think, I had rather you didn't go."

"On the top story, the first door to the—why, then, I believe I have seen him," said Humphrey, astonished, but rather relieved, "an old man with white hair."

"Yes, he is old but I think not very old," Charlotte answered, "his hair is white, but that is because he has been ill and in trouble. He told me that it was quite light like mine, two or three years ago. Do you know him ? Do you think he will be angry with me ?"

"I saw him on the stairs one night—he looked very

ill," said Humphrey. "I don't think he will be angry with you ; I will go and see him, and explain how it was, and then, if you like, I will let you know sometimes how he is."

"But that won't be the same to me as going myself," said Charlotte, piteously, "it makes the days seem quite different when I can see him. He lets me talk as much as I like, and never thinks me foolish."

"But I don't think you ought to see him without your aunt's permission," said Humphrey, speaking straight out at last, as if to a child. "I don't think she would like you to go there without her knowledge."

"Oh, no, she would be very angry if she knew—but then she always is angry with me, so that does not make it any worse," said Charlotte, with unconscious philosophy. "I ought not to have gone out, I know, but I could not think of any other way to see him. Perhaps, when he is well again, he will come here."

"Perhaps he will ; that will be all right," said Humphrey. "Shall I tell him that you will not be able to go and see him again at present?"

"I—mayn't I write him a note for you to take?" said Charlotte flushing up, and with tears trembling in her eyes again ; "please, I *must* write to him, he will think me so unkind."

She ran to the table and began writing with hurrying fingers. In a few minutes she returned to Humphrey with a note which the lad had not the heart to refuse. It was addressed in her childish, unformed hand, to M. Rossel, Rue de Seine.

"I have told him I can't come again just now," she said, "please, will you let me know soon how he is ? Only I never see you now—you don't come to the studio. But I shall want to hear ; and you won't say anything about it to anyone else ?"

"Of course not," answered Humphrey rather indignant, "but will you let me advise you, Miss Grey, to tell all your story to the Princess Zaraikine ? She will be able to help you if anyone can"—"and keep you from getting into any more mischief," he had nearly added.

"Yes, I know. Thank you, you are very kind," she said. Then lifting her eyes to his with the gentle look in them that had won more than one heart for little Charlotte, she said, "There are a great many kind people in the world, I think ; I used to fancy there were none."

"Indeed, I cannot imagine how anyone can be unkind to you," said Humphrey, as he took her little hand in his, and left the room. And in fact, he would as soon have thought of being unkind to a little bird flying giddily round its nest, as it tries its wings for the first time.

So these had been Charlotte's troubles, Humphrey thought to himself, as he walked along with her poor little note in his pocket, and a great deal of compassion in his heart for the little stray girl whose childish faults might end by crushing her woman's life. What would become of Charlotte, with the dull hours of which she took such weary count? Randolph already dimly felt what he has often thought since, that the sorrows of which we hear so much in the world, misunderstood genius, unappreciated talent, thwarted ambitions, and the like, are not perhaps, amongst the worst. For them there is compensation in the very powers that work discontent. There are sorrows more pitiful than these—the sorrows of dim natures with no clear vision beyond the small successive events of their own lives, with no wide sympathy with unpersonal interests in which to forget their personal troubles, with no sense of the worth of that suffering which brings with it a comprehension of the sufferings of humanity. Nothing, I think, can be sadder than the unexpectant dulness that seems to gather on the faces of those who share in the common deprivations of life, without power to grasp the splendor also common to all who can open their hearts to receive it. And if Christianity only, perhaps, in its divine freedom from scorn can solve the problem of natures such as these, Christianity itself too often reaches them through the channel of some complex creed, robbed of its simplest truths and clearest inspirations.

So Randolph vaguely felt even then, as he walked along, musing upon dim little Charlotte and her troubles.

It was still early when Humphrey reached home ; he could see a light shining under M. Rossel's door, and with Charlotte's note in his pocket, he resolved to call upon his neighbor and deliver it, if possible, that very night. He knocked. A voice from within cried, "Come in !" and he entered the room, of which he had already had a passing glimpse.

In size and shape it was the counterpart of his own, but a screen drawn across the middle converted the lower half into a warm interior, where M. Rossel sat in a large arm-chair by a table set in front of the fire. Humphrey recognized him at once, and he saw also that Charlotte's supposition that he was not very old, was a correct one. The lines on his face were of suffering rather than of age ; his blanched hair was abundant, and together with his short beard and mustache, had the faint gilded look peculiar to yellow hair that is turning white ; his grey-blue eyes were narrow, dim, and half-closed. He might have been any age between forty and sixty ; he was, in fact, about forty-eight.

He was not alone. Opposite to him, in front of the fire, stood a long-faced, red-whiskered man, well-dressed, and with a travelling-bag swinging in his hand.

"I can only say, Monsieur, that you've played me a shabby trick, a most confoundedly shabby trick," he was saying angrily, as Humphrey came into the room ; "but it's of no use to discuss the matter any further, and as I must leave for Brussels to-night, I have the honor to wish you good-evening."

"Wait a minute—there's no hurry," said M. Rossel. His voice though hoarse and feeble, was pleasant ; his accent not Parisian, but better than that of his Belgian companion. "Upon my honor," he said, "I am very sorry ; I had no wish to throw you over, but when a man is as hard up as I am he must look after his own interests."

"It's as shabby a trick as ever I knew," repeated the other with increasing irritation. "Why the articles you promised me are advertised—advertised by me in this month's *Revue*, and what the devil will my subscribers

think when they see the whole series appear in the *Chronique* instead?"

"That you were a fool to advertise before your agreement was signed and settled, I should say," answered M. Rossel.

"Well, Monsieur, well, there is nothing more to be said. I was a fool, no doubt—no doubt I was a fool; but I had your promise, and I trusted to your honor. I thought, Monsieur, you would look upon it as a matter in which your honor was engaged."

"Not at all," answered M. Rossel; "I looked upon it simply as a matter of business. Excuse me," he said, turning to Humphrey, who was standing by the screen uncertain whether to advance or retreat, "will you find yourself a chair? No, don't go away, I shall be at your service in one minute. Look here, now," he went on to the Belgian editor, "I don't want to quarrel with you. We have done very well together hitherto, and if we can come to any arrangement now, nothing could please me better."

"What arrangement, Monsieur? what arrangement is possible? I can't pretend to offer you more than the editor of the *Chronique*. I am an honest man, M. Rossel, and I can't afford to bribe my contributors. At the same time, you have put me in a confoundedly awkward position, and if you have anything reasonable to propose I am willing to listen to it."

"Well, look here," said M. Rossel again, "the fact is I am so hard up that I am obliged to sacrifice something for the sake of present convenience. You have the advantage of me, and that's the truth. Suppose, for instance, you could make it convenient to come to some settlement before leaving Paris? But sit down again, and let us talk it over."

The Belgian drew a chair to the table, and the two men began to talk in undertones, whilst Humphrey, embarrassed by his awkward position, stood studying an old black engraving that hung upon the wall. Presently, however, M. Rossel spoke again, and in a louder voice.

"I suppose you will want me to sign these papers," he said ; "and how the devil I am to do it with my hands crippled like this, I don't know. I must trouble you to write the receipt, and I will put my name to it as best I can."

He took up a pen as he spoke with a hand which, as Humphrey now saw, was so bandaged and swollen as to be nearly powerless, and scrawled his name on one or two papers in succession. The Belgian placed them in a pocket-book, then rising, took up his bag and prepared to depart.

"Upon your word and honor now, M. Rossel, you won't disappoint me again," he said. "I assure you that, to a man in my position, this sort of thing is ruin—absolute ruin."

"Confound it ! I have signed your papers, what more do you want ?" said M. Rossel. "You shall have your articles all in good time ; if not, you had better come back to Paris and reclaim your money. *Bon voyage.*"

He nodded as the Belgian left the room, then turning to Humphrey again, scrutinized him with his dim eyes.

"I beg your pardon for keeping you waiting," he said ; "pray sit down. You must excuse my want of ceremony, but I am tied hand and foot, as you see."

"I am only come on a message," said Humphrey, advancing into the circle of lamplight, but standing with his hand on the back of a chair. "Miss Grey begged me—I have brought you a letter from Miss Grey."

"From Miss Grey," said M. Rossel, raising his eyebrows slightly. He took Charlotte's letter, glanced through it, then looked up at Humphrey again.

"I must explain," said the lad, getting rather red and embarrassed, "it was by the merest accident that I met Miss Grey on the stairs to-night, and learnt that she knows you."

"It was no matter," answered M. Rossel, "I did not want all Paris to hear of my arrival, but, of course, I knew she would tell some one. Sit down, will you not ? I do not often have any visitors except the porter's wife,

and a confounded doctor who does not understand my complaints. You are my neighbor, I think? It was you who were good enough to unlock my door for me, one night, if I am not mistaken."

"Yes," said Humphrey, "I live in the room opposite."

"Exactly. Well, you rendered me a service, I have been in no need of again. It was the door of my prison that you opened—I have not been able to stir from my room since."

There was a touch of querulousness in the tone of these last words, which, together with the helpless condition of a strongly-made man, moved the lad to pity. He forgot Charlotte and his indignation, and drawing a chair forward, he sat down at the table.

"You are English?" M. Rossel began again. "Not travelling for pleasure, I suppose, or you would hardly be staying here?"

"I live in Paris—I am an artist," replied Humphrey.

"An artist? Working in some French studio, probably? You look hardly old enough to be independent."

"I work in the studio of an English artist," said Humphrey, wondering a little at this frank catechism. "I am a pupil of Mr. Fleming's; you have heard of him, I daresay. Everyone has."

"Fleming—," said M. Rossel, "I knew something of an artist of that name in Rome some years ago, but I don't know if it was the same man."

"It is very possible," said Humphrey, "Mr. Fleming lived in Rome for several years, I know."

"I had no personal acquaintance with him," said M. Rossel, "and I don't suppose he ever heard my name, but he was concerned in an affair in which I took some little interest. He had some reputation of an artist even then, I believe, though it is many years ago."

"It was my master, I have no doubt," said Humphrey, "I know of no other painter of the name. He has a great reputation now," the lad went on; "every one knows him and comes to his studio."

He spoke with his old eager pride in his master's fame; but his sentence ended in a sigh. His head dropped, his voice sank; those old days seemed no more.

"I have never mixed at all with artists," said M. Rossel, "and I know only enough about pictures to be conscious of my own ignorance. I might care more for them, perhaps, if I understood them better."

He made some slight movement as he spoke, and an open book, propped on a pile of volumes on the table before him, slipped and fell to the ground. Humphrey started forward, picked it up, and replaced it before M. Rossel, whose feeble and reluctant movements showed him to be incapable of any exertion.

"Thank you," he said, as Humphrey tried to prop up the volumes more securely, "you see what a helpless log I am. I can manage to turn over the leaves, and that is about all."

"That is dreadful," said Humphrey, impulsively, "is there no one to be with you? Surely, Monsieur, you ought not to be here all alone."

"The porter's wife looks after me," he answered, "and bores me to death. If there is a thing on earth I hate, it is a woman who potters and nurses. My doctor, who is a fool, wanted me to stay in bed and have a *sœur*; but I told him that if I was going to die, it should be in a chair, without any confounded white cap flitting before my eyes. I do very well; not but that it is confoundedly hard to be tied here in this way—most confoundedly hard."

"It must be—I can't bear to think of it," said Humphrey, with the eager and wondering pity of youth for suffering altogether alien to its own experience. "I don't know if I could be of any use to you," he went on, after a moment's pause and with some embarrassment, "but I am so close at hand, and if there were anything I could do for you, I should be very glad."

"Thank you, you are very good," said M. Rossel, "but you are out all day, I suppose? You have your own work to attend to?"

"That is no matter," said Humphrey, getting red, "at least—I mean, I can leave it for the present. It does not signify."

"Thank you," said M. Rossel again. He sat considering for a minute. "I really don't like to trouble you," he said, at last, "but the fact is, if you could spare me a few hours, you might be of great service to me. I have promised the editor of the Brussels *Revue Contemporaine*—that gentleman you saw here just now—a series of papers on the progressive state of society in the principal cities of Europe during the last hundred years. The first article ought to be ready by the end of the month, and I don't want to disappoint the poor devil if I can help it—besides, it might create some awkwardness which it is always best to avoid, if possible. Now I can't write, as you may see; but the notes and materials are all ready, and if you could help me in arranging them and writing from my dictation, you would be doing me a service for which I should be grateful."

"I shall be delighted," said Humphrey, "and I will do my best, though I am afraid I don't know much about that sort of work."

"There will be no difficulty, and I don't think you will find the subject a dull one. The papers are all in that portfolio—no, I won't ask you to look them over to-night," as Humphrey got up, "but any time to-morrow, I shall be ready for you. I am always at home, and generally alone, so we shall have no interruptions."

"Very well, I shall come to-morrow morning," said Humphrey, and left the room as the porter's wife, fresh, smiling, and benevolent, made her appearance at the door.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A New Friend.

CHARLOTTE had spoken truly in saying that she no longer met Humphrey at the studio ; it was now some weeks since the lad had given up going there regularly. A friend passing through Paris had been his excuse for absenting himself in the first instance ; but when his friend was gone, he still kept away. The old life under its altered conditions seemed insupportable to him, and he held aloof from it with feelings that he would have found it hard to define ; even to himself he would hardly have acknowledged that he was cherishing a growing resentment towards Mr. Fleming, as an outlet for his vague feeling of resentment against fate. Our troubles are not the less hard, but sometimes the harder to bear when they seem shaped for us by the fateful working of circumstances, and not by a visible hand. In the dull feeling of antagonism to his master, Humphrey found a definite sensation, which, whilst it increased his unhappiness tenfold, was yet in itself some sort of relief in the midst of the black cloud that seemed to wrap him round and distort every familiar object. It was for him one of those times of nightmare oppression out of which there is no clear issue but through practical duty and renunciation. It was a lesson which the boy, who was only a boy, wayward and unreasonable enough in those days, had yet to learn ; but it was a lesson he was destined before long to see written as in letters of fire across his life.

In the first weeks, indeed, he still made his appearance from time to time in the studio, making such excuses as

he could for his absence ; and Mr. Fleming, however used to his pupil's varying moods and fits of silence, became aware at length of some definite change in his tone and spirits.

"Are you not well, my boy?" he said to him one day.

The kind voice, unconscious of offence, went to the lad's heart.

"I—I am not very well," he said, "I think I will leave my work for to-day, if you can spare me ;" and laying down his brushes, he abruptly left the room. The next morning he came at an early hour, and painted steadily the whole day. His work would not go ; he had lost the inspiration of his picture and could not immediately recover it ; but he worked on nevertheless till dusk. Ersilia did not come, and Mr. Fleming was out the greater part of the day. In the evening, Humphrey carefully cleaned his palette and brushes, put them aside, and returned no more.

This was shortly after his first visit to M. Rossel ; nor could he, I think, have held to his dogged resolution to avoid all that he most cared for in life, but for this new interest and occupation that he had found. A genuine compassion for the lonely and suffering man filled Randolph's mind ; for some weeks he was constantly with him, and a friendship, that under other circumstances could hardly have arisen, sprang up naturally between the two. M. Rossel on his side professed (and neither then nor afterwards had Randolph any reason to doubt the truth of these professions) a sincere gratitude and affection for the lad, who indeed did his best to nurse and cheer him, sitting up with him more than once at night, and devoting to him a good part of each day. I do not know whether he carried his sincerity and honest purpose written in his face, or whether Charlotte's letter had been a testimonial in his favor ; but certain it is that M. Rossel accepted these services without further question. They were services willingly rendered. Apart from the natural good-will that made him glad to give help where

help was so much needed, Humphrey felt pleased and flattered, as became his years, by the confidence placed in him by a man so much his superior in experience, talent, and learning, as he soon discovered M. Rossel to be. The impressions with which he had begun the acquaintance passed away. He did not forget Charlotte, but her story faded into an episode over which he sometimes wondered a little, but with which he could not feel he had any especial concern.

What M. Rossel would have done at this time without Randolph's unexpected assistance, the lad could not even conjecture. The worst of his illness, indeed, was over when Humphrey first made his acquaintance; he soon began to recover strength from day to day, but he was slow in regaining the use of his hands, and in the meantime his articles for the Brussels *Revue* must have remained unwritten. What resources he had to fall back upon, Humphrey did not inquire. His help, as I have said, was gladly given, and M. Rossel, having once accepted his offer of assistance, soon gave him enough to do in copying, arranging, and writing from dictation. Humphrey liked the sort of work, which was new to him; the subject of the papers was an amusing one, and M. Rossel's notes revealed an amount of varied reading which to the Randolph of those days, not long emancipated from school classics, seemed amazing. If, as he had afterwards reason to believe, M. Rossel managed to satisfy the claims of both the Brussels editors by means more ingenious than straightforward, he had no suspicion of it at the time, nor, being at an age when the sympathies are out of all proportion to the powers of reasoning, would he probably have credited the fact, had it been told him. When the first essay was finished, it was with as much pride as if he himself had been its author that he sent it off, and looked forward to the day when the number of the *Revue Contemporaine* in which it was to appear should be forwarded to them. That day never arrived for him; long before the article made its appearance, the brief episode in his life with which it was associated had come

to an end ; but only lately he came across some old numbers of the *Revue* containing these essays, and found that he could still admire the clearness of thought and brilliancy of expression that had struck him at the time he helped to write them. A softened feeling came over him, as he read, towards the man to whom he had devoted some hours of his youth ; it was a feeling that bridged over the separating years of a fated antagonism and alienation.

Randolph, however, did not spend the whole of these dark mid-winter days with his new friend. He had made plenty of acquaintance by this time, and in idleness or amusement was in no want of companions. Two or three of these came to be in after-days valued and life-long friends ; others there were who did the lad no good, and who presently disappeared from his horizon. It is a part of his life that does not concern us here, except as it affected his whole conduct at that time. The boy was an honest-hearted boy enough on the whole with no especial love for mischief, and I do not know that he came to much actual harm. Neither would his follies nor his scrapes, I think, have been serious, but for a spirit of recklessness that had seized him—a spirit that made him feel more and more as if he were drifting away from pure aims and noble ambitions, till the thought of past days and of Ersilia came to him as the thought of vanished happiness might come to one who looking from some outer darkness through barring gates, should see his loved ones walking amongst the flowers in the clearness of the evening light.

M. Rossel, who had a sick man's craving for the news from the outer world that seems to give a firmer hold on life, liked Humphrey to go out, and to tell him all he had been seeing and doing on his return. He liked to hear the lad talk, he said, and used sometimes to question him about his early life ; and Humphrey, who like all people of a reserved nature, looked upon every confidence as momentous, felt a new friendship for this man as he told him of his grandfather, and his uncle, and his early life at the farm—memories still recent in those days,

though already beginning to recede into how remote a past. M. Rossel, sitting in his arm-chair, appeared to take much interest in these fresh histories, which Humphrey related probably with the simplicity and earnestness we throw into subjects of supreme interest to ourselves.

"So you offended your uncle and lost a fortune because you had made up your mind to be an artist," he said to the boy one day. "That does not say much for your wisdom, Randolph, as you will find out for yourself some time or other."

"I don't think so," answered Humphrey; "I couldn't live without painting, and I don't care for money. If one has enough to live upon, I don't see what more one can want."

"One may want a good many things, my good fellow, if one has tastes above those of a ploughboy. It is all very well whilst you are young; a crust of bread with illusions goes a long way, I know. But thirty years hence, when you have painted your best and found out that you are not the genius you think yourself now, when you have a wife, perhaps, of whom you are tired, and children who are tired of you, and have nothing to look forward to but twenty years or so of failing powers, things will appear very different."

"I don't know," said Humphrey, considering. He was trying, as was his fashion in those days, to bring his mind into sympathy with the last opinion he had heard. "Thirty years hence," he said at last, "I hope to be a great artist; if I am not, I shall be so disappointed that I shall not care for anything else. Of course I shall sell my pictures when they are painted, so that I shall always have enough to live upon. I shall never marry."

"That is a wise resolution that you are not likely to keep. But even if you don't marry, you will find out by and by that there are a great many pretty things of all sorts in the world worth having if you can afford to pay for them. However, I don't want to preach a sermon you won't believe in; only I am sorry for your own sake you have made up your mind to be an artist."

"Why?" said the lad. "I think it is the most splendid calling upon earth."

"Well, to speak frankly, I do not. From what I know of artists, I have no great liking for them, I own. They create a haze, and look at the world through it, and then damn everyone who is not of their way of thinking. I don't speak of you, Randolph, I like you; but then I think you were meant for something better than spending your life in a love-sick straining after transcendental ideas."

"I don't know what you mean," said Humphrey, flushing up and indignant. "It is because artists see more than others," he went on with great originality, "and have the power to reveal it, that they are artists. They have ~~more~~, not less insight than the rest of the world."

"There are different kinds of insight, my good boy. If you go to the bottom of a well you will see the stars by daylight, but you will see nothing else. You may call it a prejudice if you will—I am old enough to own to prejudices—but I confess that your whole race of poets, artists, sentiment-mongers of every degree, are antipathetic to me."

Humphrey looked up astonished. M. Rossel had spoken as men used to do who speak from impulse and feeling, not from motive, and the lad's instinctive surprise now first revealed to him perhaps how rare this was with M. Rossel.

"I resent the whole system as one of imposture," he went on smiling, and more in his usual manner. "Nature has a great many pretty tricks; but they are only tricks, and an artistic and poetic mythology founded on them is as unsound as any other mythology. And then you are apt to be such a melancholy set. You narrow your life into a groove, and seem to have no power of getting outside it again. I see the beginning of it in you already, Randolph, and I have found it true of others so far as my experience goes. Your master now, Mr. Fleming, should you call him a happy man?"

"Mr. Fleming!" said Humphrey, with a sudden uncontrollable emotion, "Mr. Fleming not happy? He is the happiest man on earth. He is going to be married to the most adorable—" He stopped short. The words had escaped him involuntarily; in all his confidences to M. Rossel he had never yet mentioned the Princess Zaraikine.

"Indeed! Then his happiness does not surprise me," said M. Rossel. "This is beside the question, but it interests me, Randolph. Mr. Fleming is going to be married to the most adorable woman—might one without indiscretion inquire who she is?"

"I don't know why I should not tell you," said Humphrey, recovering himself, "he is going to marry the Princess Zaraikine."

There was a moment's pause before M. Rossel answered.

"The Princess Zaraikine—" he said, "I have heard my little pupil, Miss Grey, mention a Princess Zaraikine: is it the same? She spoke of her as a friend, but she did not tell me that she was going to be married."

"She may not have known it at the time," said Humphrey. "It is no secret, but the marriage will not be till late in the spring, and it is not much talked of. There is no reason why Miss Grey should not have mentioned it."

"And in your eyes she is the most adorable—that is awkward for you, my young friend."

"She is my cousin," answered Humphrey shortly, "and almost the only relation I have in the world."

"Your cousin; how can that be? She is English then?"

"Her mother was English," said Humphrey, "and she spent all her childhood in England. She always looks upon herself as an Englishwoman."

"I understand—yes, I remember Miss Grey spoke of her as being English. You will wonder at these questions," M. Rossel went on after a moment's reflection, "but what you say confirms me in the idea that my old

friend Prince Zaraikine was the husband of this lady. He married a young English girl."

"And deserted her," cried Humphrey. "I beg your pardon, M. Rossel, if he was your friend, but every one knows that history and how ill he used his wife."

"Prince Zaraikine was my friend," said M. Rossel, "and I know more about his history, I dare say, than any one else. It has two sides to it, like most other histories. People do neither good nor harm gratuitously in this world. There is cause and effect in everything."

"I fail to conceive any adequate cause for a man's deserting his young wife, I must own," said Humphrey impetuously; "it seems to me a piece of cold-blooded scoundrelism."

"Of course it does. You young fellows always run your heads against a wall, and then wonder you can't see anything on the other side. Zaraikine probably saw the matter in a different light from that in which you see it. He was obliged to marry for money; but he had no wish to form an establishment, and he didn't want a wife. He was already in love with one of the handsomest and most brilliant women in Europe, and why should he trouble himself about a little school girl?"

"But she was his wife," said the lad.

"Very true, my good boy; but, as I have just said, he didn't marry her because he wanted a wife, but because he wanted money. He got the money, and his wife returned to live with her relations. It was quite simple, and she was much better off, if she had but known it."

"When a man like that, without honor, without principles, without morality," said Humphrey, indignant and stammering, "when a man like that marries, one cannot wonder at his deserting his wife, or at any other baseness. But I own I don't understand how any one can defend him."

"I don't defend him, my good fellow; it is not a question of defence; the thing was inevitable. When you have a wife, Randolph, you will perhaps understand how small a proportion a man's married life may bear to

the whole, and that if he cultivates varied interests, he must of necessity have an existence apart from his domestic affairs. Zaraikine, who had lived more than forty years in the world before he set eyes on his wife, had probably other things to do with his honor and his principles, and his morality, than to devote them to making the happiness of a little girl who, for the rest, was the last woman in the world to suit him. I saw her once at Vienna, shortly after her marriage; a pale girl, with handsome hair and eyes, but she had not the art *de se faire valoir* in society, and at home must have been the dullest company in the world."

Humphrey sat silent; he was uneasy and wrathful, with a certain revulsion of feeling towards M. Rossel that he could not at once overcome. He had never liked him so little as at that moment. M. Rossel perceived it perhaps, for as the lad began putting his writing materials together with the intention of leaving for the night, he spoke again.

"You don't agree with me, I see, Randolph," he said: "and after all I am not sure but that you are right. It might have been better for Zaraikine, as things turned out, to have stood by his little Hausfrau. It could not well have turned out worse for him, poor fellow. You know the end of his history, I dare say?"

"I know what every one else knows," said Humphrey, "that he was mixed up in some Polish conspiracy through his intimacy with a Polish lady, and lost his life in attempting to escape from Russia."

"Well, that is hardly a correct version. Zaraikine had nothing to do with the conspiracy; he never even heard of it. A man may be in love with a woman without finding it a reason for betraying his country, and risking his own life. Zaraikine, who was fool enough in some ways, was not fool enough for that. It was the Countess who managed to implicate him—how, was never exactly known—and to save her son, who was concerned in the affair, sacrificed her lover."

"The woman he was in love with?" said Humphrey.

"Yes. She had great force of character and was devoted, it appears, to this son. Zاراikine, I believe, thought she was devoted to him; but there are certain points upon which women are incalculable. I do not know how she received the news of his death."

"Is it true that he was drowned?" said Humphrey. "That was the story I heard."

"Yes, that is true enough," said M. Rossel. "He was drowned in attempting to cross a river. A party of soldiers had been sent to arrest him on the frontier; he shot the officer in command and jumped into the water, with the intention of swimming across. The stream was not wide, and there were friends waiting to give him a helping hand on the opposite bank; but it was in the dusk of a winter evening, and the current was strong and encumbered with blocks of ice; he was carried away before their eyes—"

"You were there?" said Humphrey, with keen interest.

"Yes—" he said gloomily, "I was there. After all there was nothing perhaps to regret," he went on after a minute; "if we had saved him it might have been for a life worse than death. The young officer whom he shot was the son of a Minister high in Court favor, and there is no corner of Europe to which the Russian Government would not have pursued him. It is better as it is."

Humphrey did not answer. Somehow, this story, in which he might have read only a just retribution, had also awakened in him a wider sense of compassion than he had yet known; a perception that in the most wayward lives that move us to a righteous indignation there may be tragedies that may also move us to pity.

Monsieur Rossel, too, was silent for some minutes. He had a book open before him, but he was not reading.

"Tell me something more of the Princess Zاراikine," he said, presently, "she is considered handsome now, you say?"

"I don't know," answered Humphrey, abruptly, "I don't know that I ever heard any one say so. It is a subject I never discussed."

"But you think her so yourself?"

The lad hesitated. "I beg your pardon," he said, flushing, "I had rather not talk to you of the Princess Zاراikine; to me she is unlike all other women, but you have seen her yourself, and from what you have said, I don't suppose you would understand."

"You are mistaken, Randolph," said M. Rossel closing his book and turning round, "when I saw the Princess Zاراikine she was a mere child. I may have thought her then an unfit wife for a man like Zاراikine, but she is probably very different now from what she was a few years ago. A girl of sixteen is not a woman at all; she has yet to develop every quality."

"I don't know," said Humphrey, "when I first saw the Princess Zاراikine, we were both children; and I believe I thought then as I think now, that there is something in her that sets her apart from every other woman upon earth."

"And that is—what?"

"How can I tell?" said Humphrey, quivering with impatience and starting up impetuously, "one does not analyze the most sacred influences that come to one in life—one accepts them."

"That is as it may be—some people like to analyze everything and find out what it is worth. But I don't want to trouble you, my good boy. Only as an old friend of Zاراikine's, I feel some interest in his wife."

These last words sounded like a reproach, and disconcerted Humphrey, one of whose weaknesses in those days was an uneasy sensitiveness which was apt to make his most ardent impulses and steadiest resolutions alike fail before implied disapproval.

"What is it you want to know?" he said reluctantly after a pause, "nothing that I could say of the Princess Zاراikine would give you any idea of what she is, but I have a drawing of her that I can show you if you like."

He left the room, and presently returned with one of the best of the many likenesses he had tried to take of

Ersilia. He laid it in silence before M. Rossel, who took it up and examined it attentively in the full light of the lamp.

"I see—it is a beautiful face," he said at length, "if this does not flatter her, she must be greatly improved. But there is something in the expression of the eyes that affects me unpleasantly; it is too dreamy and melancholy; and it contradicts that of the rest of the face, which is not dreamy. Is that your fault, Randolph, or have you been faithful to the original?"

"She has a thousand expressions—I suppose I have caught one of them," said Humphrey, "her eyes are never dreamy when she speaks."

"Then she would please me better," said M. Rossel, laying down the sketch, and leaning back in his chair, "why indeed should she look melancholy? She has youth, and beauty, it appears, and riches—she is rich, is she not?"

"I believe so—I don't know—I never inquired," said Humphrey.

He hardly knew what he was saying; he had taken up the drawing M. Rossel had laid down, and was studying it again with misty eyes, as he had studied it a hundred times before. Presently he looked up, M. Rossel was watching him.

"Well?" he said smiling.

There was kindness, or Humphrey thought so, as well as amusement in his smile, friendliness as well as sarcasm in his grey eyes, which had grown keen and clear in these last days, as the dimness of ill-health passed away. The lad's barrier of reserve broke down.

"I don't know how to live without her," he said, flinging his arms across the table, and in a voice broken by a sob, "and I can never be anything to her—never."

A wide converse with evil as with good is perhaps essential, is at any rate almost inevitable in this world. But there comes a perilous moment in all such varied intercourse, when, from whatever cause, the soul begins to waver in its pure instincts of right and wrong, and Ran-

dolph, as he left M. Rossel that evening, felt as though, in some such moment of uncertainty, he had allowed a desecrating light to fall within some shrine that held the hallowed symbols of his highest faith and aspirations.

CHAPTER XIX.

• In The Studio.

HUMPHREY had not forgotten Charlotte, nor his promise to keep her informed as to M. Rossel's welfare, though the friendship between these two, which had once started and puzzled him, was a problem he had ceased to dwell upon. He had called two or three times in the Rue du Helder, but Mrs. Grey's numerous engagements seldom allowed her to be at home, and he had only once succeeded in catching a glimpse of the girl. Indeed, some time had now elapsed since he had seen her at all, and it was, perhaps, because his conscience reproached him on this point, that a few days after the above conversation with M. Rossel, he resolved to go to the studio on an afternoon when he thought it probable he might find her there. Charlotte had so readily promised to give up her visits to M. Rossel, that Humphrey never doubted that all communication between them had come to an end; it did not occur to him that a nature so facile in one direction would probably be equally yielding in another, and that Charlotte might at this time be under a stronger influence than his own. He only thought that she might be longing for tidings he alone could give, and that he would go to the studio on the chance of seeing her. This, at least, was the reason he assigned to himself, though who shall say how many other motives went to make up the sudden resolution?

The day was destined to be memorable in more ways than one to Humphrey, for it was on this morning that putting his hand into his pocket before going out to breakfast at a restaurant, he discovered that two sous was

the exact amount of ready money left in his possession. We so readily blind ourselves beforehand to the perfectly obvious results of our actions, that it need surprise no one that this discovery came upon Humphrey as a shock. His income, as I have said, was not large, and he had only been able to make his summer journey to the Pyrenees on the strength of those ready promises to himself of extra economy during the winter, which it is the easiest thing in the world to make. But his mode of life during the last month or two had not been favorable to economy as he was well aware. The recklessness of which I have spoken had naturally made itself felt in his money affairs, and it would have required no great wisdom to foresee that the vague calculations which kept his mind easily balanced, might presently end in the most clearly defined absence of anything to calculate upon. Humphrey, however, had been so used to put his hand into his pocket amongst small change, that he never took the trouble to count, that he had come to regard it as impossible that an arrangement so admirably fitting in with his idea of the unalterable scheme of things should absolutely come to an end; and as he stood now on this bleak January morning in the midst of his fireless room, contemplating the brown coins that lay in his hand, he felt a not unusual difficulty in realizing a state of things he himself had done his best to bring about. His perplexity was increased by the fact that he felt himself without any immediate resource. He had already on emergencies, for which the small change would not suffice, borrowed as many francs of his acquaintances as he cared to owe, or they could afford to lend; for though a kindly notion prevailed among the young fellows who made his society at this time, that the fact of one of them having so many francs above the average was a reason for lending to another who only had so many below, they were none of them much better off than Randolph himself. He had no drawings available for sale, even if he could have found a purchaser; and the few personal possessions that he could have turned into money, had in them some-

thing of the nature of relics, and could not be lightly parted with.

Humphrey, however, soon roused himself. He was a philosopher, who had worn old coats to prove that he could reduce far-reaching theories to daily practice, and he was not to be at once discomfited because the pockets of his coat were not only old but empty ; moreover, he had that resolute faith in pleasant possibilities not uncommon in people who are in the habit of shutting their eyes to unpleasant certainties. He went out, bought a roll for breakfast, and then dismissed his anxieties for the moment in the hope of some better fortune turning up before dinner-time.

It was previous to discovering the state of his pockets, that he had made up his mind to go that day to the studio, and about four o'clock he set out, after finishing some work for M. Rossel, who, although better and able to write now, without much difficulty, still claimed the lad's services. Humphrey was beginning to feel hungry by this time ; but he had the consciousness, always dear to a philosophic soul, that he was enlarging his own experience by entering into that of many fellow-creatures—those who go hungry every day—and the slight elation he felt at this helped him, perhaps, to hold to his resolution ; for it was with the reluctance with which we resume relations wilfully broken off, that he had started for the Rue de Clichy. How long was it since he had been at the studio ? He himself could hardly have told. Not very long perhaps, after all—not long to Mr. Fleming, in the exquisite spring of gladness that had known how to blossom for him in the midst of the darkness of winter ; nor to Ersilia, whose life was expanding amongst influences that seemed to crown it with glory, as the sunshine crowns the opening flower it has touched into fuller life. Only to Humphrey the days had seemed to stretch themselves out like an evil dream.

It is not to be supposed that Humphrey had been content to allow this time to pass without seeing anything of the Princess Zaraikine. It is true that he had

of late given up going to her house, and that, on two occasions when she had written to ask him there, he had made no effort to break off engagements he had already made. One of these invitations had come in a dark moment, when he could not face the thought of meeting Ersilia, and he had written a hasty refusal. On the other occasion, which was Christmas Day, he had at least the satisfaction of knowing that no unworthy motive kept him away, for he and another man had promised to cheer the sick-room of a poor consumptive lad, who, pining far from home, died a few months afterwards. But from whatever reason he had held himself aloof from her immediate presence, there were few days lately, on which he had not found time to place himself in a certain doorway, nearly opposite her house, where himself unseen, he might hope to catch a passing glimpse of her as she came in and out. This device, which had for Humphrey the original interest that we all find in the commonplaces of life when they are new to us, was not always accomplished without difficulty, owing to the demands made by M. Rossel upon his time ; nor could it be affirmed that pain did not preponderate over pleasure when after, perhaps, a chill hour of waiting in his dark corner, he at length saw her pass along the street, or get into the carriage with Mademoiselle Mathilde. A widening gulf seemed between them, a sense of alienation that had arisen he hardly knew when or how, but which had taken shape day by day till it had become a moral impossibility to him even to cross the street, to exchange common words of greeting, to meet the sincere glance of her eyes that seemed to demand an answering sincerity.

Only once a little incident came to break the monotony of mingled pain and joy during those hours of watching. It was about six o'clock one evening ; it had been raining, but the clouds had passed away, and there were stars in the wintry sky. Humphrey had been at his post nearly an hour, and had almost lost the hope of seeing Ersilia that day, when a tipsy woman came reeling along the pavement and fell, a miserable heap, at the foot of a

lamp-post just opposite the doorway where he stood. The street was quiet ; no *sergent-de-ville* was at hand, and she lay there moaning and unmolested. Not a minute afterwards he saw Ersilia coming along, accompanied by her old attendant, Roberts. She paused at once as she came up to the poor wretched woman sitting forlorn on the pavement.

"This woman must be ill, Roberts," she said. "What can we do to help her?"

"Don't touch her, for Heaven's sake, Madam !" said the experienced Roberts ; "she's drunk, poor miserable creature ; that is what's the matter with her."

"Why should you say so ? She has perhaps hurt herself, or fallen through weakness," said Ersilia, who, like all people with large and simple minds, was incapable, without ascertained facts, of putting a low interpretation upon the conduct of the most abandoned wretch upon earth. "Do you think you could get up ?" she said, stooping down over the woman ; "it is too cold and wet for you to sit there upon the pavement."

She held out her hand as she spoke. The woman clutched it, and leaning heavily, with her other arm round the lamp-post, staggered to her feet. She looked quite young and was decently clad, except that her gown was wet and dragged in the mud. Humphrey involuntarily started forward as she laid her hand on Ersilia's wrist ; but no one noticed him, and at that instant a man in a blouse came up.

"So you're at your old tricks again, are you ?" he said savagely to the woman, speaking in English. "Come home with me at once, will you ? unless you want yourself locked up. I beg you pardon, Madame," he went on more quietly to Ersilia, "but you had much better let her alone. She is as drunk as she can be."

"I see—it is very sad," said Ersilia regretfully. "Don't let her walk home through the streets ; she is not fit for it. If you would call that fiacre, and give me your address, I would tell the coachman where to take you."

An empty fiacre was standing at a short distance. The

man called it and helped the woman in, whilst Ersilia gave some money to the driver.

"Thank you kindly, Madame," the man said in his gruff voice, as he followed the woman into the carriage, and shut the door. "I don't know how I should have got her home, and I haven't above three sous in my pocket."

"You are English," said Ersilia; "you have perhaps not many friends in Paris? May I come and see your wife—she is your wife, is she not?"

"No, she ain't," said the man roughly; "but you may come and see her if you like. You know where she lives."

"I will come," said Ersilia. "Be good to her; she seems to be very young."

"You had far better be doing no such thing, Madam," said Roberts, as the fiacre drove off, and speaking with the privileged familiarity of an old servant, who can never forget the nursling she has held in her arms; "a lady like you has no business with people such as them."

"Why not, Roberts?" answered Ersilia. "I sometimes wonder whether I have not more business with them than with any other people in the world—"

She crossed the street with the old servant, and the *porte-cochère* on the opposite side clanged behind them before Humphrey, who, with an instinctive dislike to his position, had come out into the street again, could make up his mind to speak to her. He never learned the sequel to this adventure, and he felt some remorse at having been in some sort a spy, as it were, upon Ersilia's actions; and yet there was a secret exultation in his heart that he could neither describe nor defend as he walked away to the restaurant where he was to dine. It was an exultation without joy, for it had its source in all the bitterness of his life at that time; it arose from the thought that through long hours of watching such as his master had never endured for Ersilia's sake, he had won for himself, apart from his master, a share in Ersilia's life.

Humphrey then, in his most wayward moments, had

known how to preserve himself from that worst sense of isolation, when sight and knowledge seem to fail us because we are wholly cut off from the loved one. And as he walked now along the Rue de Clichy in the declining January afternoon on his way to the studio, he forgot to think that his motive in going there was to see Charlotte, and became absorbed in another thought, which he had till now resolutely kept in the background—the thought that Ersilia might be there. Would she be there? The eager longing grew upon him as he mounted the well-known staircase, where familiar associations seemed to be lying in wait to take possession of him once more. What, after all, had he been doing all this time in absenting himself from these friends, this work, this life which alone were possible to him? Was it indeed only a nightmare that had held him during these past weeks, from which with one struggle he could set himself free and find all things as before?

The door of the studio was half open, and he went in. The grey evening which had begun to be veiled by falling snow, looked in at the unshuttered windows; but within, the room was full of firelight, that seemed to hold Humphrey in a sweet and homelike embrace as he entered. Mr. Fleming was not there, nor Charlotte—he saw that at once as he advanced beyond a screen drawn round the doorway—only Ersilia, seated by the fire in the clear light of the crackling logs. She was never absent from his thoughts, and yet it always seemed to him that he saw her for the first time. She was leaning back now in her chair, with an open letter in her hand and her eyes fixed on the fire with the intent gaze that betokens far-off thoughts. She wore some straight-falling winter dress bordered with fur, and her fur cloak, thrown over the chair made a background whose dark softness brought into relief the delicate purity of her profile, and enhanced by contrast the brighter tints of her brown hair. Even in repose there were strength and purpose in her attitude, an unconscious harmony and fitness in every line. Of her, Randolph thought it might be said, as it is some-

where written of the old Greek sculptures—that in passion and repose alike, one recognizes the presence of a noble simplicity and silent greatness.

She was thinking intently and did not notice Humphrey's entrance till he was close to her.

"You, Humphrey!" she said then, giving her hand cordially, but without smiling. "It is long since we have seen you."

"Mr. Fleming is not here?" said Humphrey, embarrassed. His first sensations had already passed away. He felt like a stranger, and hardly knew how to explain his presence now that he had come.

"He will be here directly. He has gone to look for a portfolio, that he thinks he has put away in his room at the top of the house. I am expecting Aunt Mathilde every minute."

She rose as she spoke, and going to the piano, which was open, began putting together some music that lay on it. Humphrey, constrained and miserable at something of coldness he seemed to discern in her voice and manner, remained standing where she had left him by the fire. But in a moment, she came back and stood opposite to him, her hands resting on the back of the chair from which she had just risen.

"Why do you never come to see us now, Humphrey?" she said earnestly; "we miss you very much. Mr. Fleming has wanted you, I know—we have all wanted you. I was afraid you might be ill; but the day Aunt Mathilde and I called at your house, the concierge told us you were well, and were gone out."

"The day you called—" said Humphrey, stupified.

"Yes," she said, "did you not know? The concierge must have forgotten to tell you."

"He often forgets—he is a stupid old man," said Humphrey. He spoke as if in a dream. She had been there, he was saying to himself the while, and he had not known it—he had never known it.

"No," he said presently, rousing himself, "no one told me. It was very good of you to come. I have been busy lately."

She did not answer at once, but stood motionless, gazing down into the fire—a somewhat sad face, whose sweetness haunted Humphrey long after.

“You have some trouble, Humphrey, is it not so?” she said at last, raising her eyes with the wistful look in them that he knew and had learned to dread like a reproach, for it held in it the memory of the maddest hour of his life. “I am sure of it, though you say nothing. Can I not help you? Will you not let me help you?”

The first words were spoken with a slight effort, but there was a touch of pleading in her last tones that went to the lad’s heart.

“What trouble should I have?” he said hastily. “Don’t think of me; I am not worth thinking about. I will come to the studio to-morrow; I will do anything you like. I am in no trouble, none—”

He broke off, as his master came into the room carrying a big portfolio.

“I have found it at last,” Mr. Fleming said, leaning it against a chair. “What, Humphrey, are you here? I have been wanting and expecting you every day for the last fortnight. Did you not get a couple of notes I sent you some time ago?”

“I—I got them,” said Humphrey, abashed and stammering. “I have been engaged.”

“You have had friends staying in Paris, I know; but that is no reason why you should neglect your work altogether, my boy. I should have been to see after you, but I have been so busy lately, I could not spare the time. It is no matter now—I have got through what I had to do; but I should have been glad of your help.”

Humphrey did not answer. He was beginning to recognize the fact that life is never a nightmare that passes and leaves no results; but he had also a strong feeling that it was not for this that he had at last made up his mind to come to the studio. He turned away and began silently to help Mr. Fleming to light the gas and arrange the studio for the evening work, according to his old custom. As he did so, he came upon his own picture, stand-

ing on its easel in a corner, and glad of something to occupy him, he brought it forward to the light and began to examine it. Mr. Fleming meanwhile returned to where Ersilia was still standing by the fire.

"This is the drawing I want you to have," he said, selecting one from the portfolio and giving it to her—a crayon sketch on grey paper, of a group of round-limbed children playing on the steps of a street-fountain. "It is only a sketch, as you see, but when it is properly mounted and framed I think it will answer your purpose. I will take it to C.'s at once, and it will be back in a few days."

"By the time I return from La Chênaie," said Ersilia, looking at the drawing with a flush of pleasure. "I sometimes think that I like your drawings of children best of all," she said, "and none that I have seen better than this one. In Rome I have watched round, dark-eyed things like these, playing and tumbling about a hundred times. How can I thank you?"

"Not by talking of going to La Chênaie," said Mr. Fleming. "I thought we agreed that there was no immediate hurry about that."

"Yes," she said; "but I have been reading Lebrun's letter again, and I think I ought to go next week. I do not like to stay here, with the thought that there may be a misunderstanding that I can remove by my presence."

Mr. Fleming did not answer at once. He was examining some detail in the drawing he had taken from her hand, but in a minute he laid it down. "I shall begin to wish there were no such place on earth," he said, smiling.

"Don't say that," she answered, smiling too, "it sounds like an echo of my own evil thoughts. I cannot help wishing sometimes—I am so ignorant about it all; I cannot feel yet that it is a part of my life, and I dread all the mistakes that I may make before I have experience enough to manage properly. If I could carry out my own plans," she went on playfully, "I should not mind so much, I daresay. Having my own way would compensate for a great deal. When I was there in the

autumn I hoped that I had made some progress, but you see Lebrun is still bent on putting obstacles in the way of everything I propose."

"I think I should take my own way," said Mr. Fleming. "You propose nothing but what is right, and Lebrun is only an obstinate old fellow who can be no judge in such matters as these."

"That is true," answered Ersilia: "but I am beginning to think that there is a kind of selfishness sometimes in satisfying one's own sense of right and wrong at the expense of other people; and Lebrun does understand the feeling of everyone on the estate better than I do. Perhaps I ought to care most of all for learning to think as they think, only that is not my idea of things; I want them to care for my thoughts. But you understand," she said, looking up with a flush and sudden smile: "and I don't know why I should trouble myself so much just now; only I think I ought to go, and it will be for only a few days."

"Only a few days," said Mr. Fleming, "when every moment of life is precious, one does not speak lightly of a few days. And then it will bring a change—you don't know how I dread change; it is the continual death in life."

"Do you think that?" said Ersilia; "I cannot feel it so. To me, change has meant life, not death."

Humphrey, standing a little apart during this conversation, had looked up from time to time, and now these differing words drew his glance irresistibly from one speaker to the other. Mr. Fleming had a face which all men loved, when they had learned to interpret it by the soul beneath; but it was pale and thin, worn with the lines wrought by a poet's life, in which ecstasy is for ever passing into pain. On Ersilia too, ennobling thought and experience had left their traces, but they had as yet served only to give to her features that higher beauty which does not pass with years, and had left untouched the exquisite transient charm of youth and freshness. It was a contrast that worked completeness; so Humphrey

felt, with a pang not wholly ungenerous, as the two stood facing each other for a brief moment's silence—a silence in which he had no part—after Ersilia had spoken. It was only for a moment; a subtle change, as in answer to unuttered words, passed over her face; then with a swift movement she turned away and began putting on her cloak. Humphrey started forward to assist her, but Mr. Fleming had already taken it from her hands.

"You need not go yet?" he said, as he helped to wrap it round her. "I want you to look at my picture, now that it is finished. You have not seen it for nearly a fortnight."

He lifted a picture that was leaning with its face to the wall, and began turning an easel so as to place it in the best light. Ersilia meanwhile went up to where Humphrey was standing before his own half-finished work.

"It promises well, Humphrey," she said, after a few moment's silent contemplation. "You ought to finish it before you lose your first inspiration."

"How long is it since you did anything to that picture, Humphrey?" said Mr. Fleming, looking round. "You must be more regular at your work, my boy, or you will never get on."

Humphrey hastily turned away and replaced his canvas in its corner, then took up a small portfolio of drawings, of which he had long been in need, and which he thought would serve him now as an ostensible reason for his visit to the studio.

"Shall you want me this evening, sir?" he said, coming forward with it under his arm; "if not, I think I will go now."

"I don't want you this evening," answered Mr. Fleming; "but be sure to come up to-morrow; I have some arrangements to make that I must talk over with you."

He was engaged in lowering his picture, and merely nodded a good-night. This painting, in which a pale Alcestis was bidding farewell to the familiar sunlight, was afterwards recognized as one of Mr. Fleming's finest

works. Humphrey knew all the sketches and first studies for it by heart; only last spring he had watched its early progress, and yet somehow the lad could hardly bear to glance now at the achieved beauty that would once have filled him with an exulting pride in his master's genius. He shook hands hurriedly with Ersilia, without looking at her, and turned to leave the room. Just as he got within the screen, however, his portfolio slipped, and he was obliged to pause and steady it on one knee, whilst he re-arranged the contents. As he half knelt, half stooped over this task, he could, though in shadow himself, still see into the glow of light and warmth in the room beyond. . . . Mr. Fleming had at last succeeded in placing his picture to his mind; it stood facing Humphrey, one of those revelations of the secrets of color that enrich life. Ersilia was mutely gazing at it, with an entire absorption that showed itself in her arrested attitude, in the unconscious tension of her clasped fingers. She did not move till Mr. Fleming, who was standing a little behind her, spoke.

"Are you satisfied with it?" he said.

She turned then and looked at him, her lips apart, her cheeks pale, in her eyes a fire, an enthusiasm that Humphrey never had seen, never could have seen in her before. "Ah, you, you—" she cried, with I know not what passionate emotion thrilled in her voice, "you make the world glorious!"

Humphrey heard no more. He gathered up his drawings as best he could, and escaped; down the dark staircase, out into the street he fled, haunted by a voice whose tones seemed ringing in his ears, by eyes whose sweetness seemed to pierce the gloom, yet bore no message to him.

CHAPTER XX.

Mrs. Grey's At Home.

HUMPHREY rushed impetuously down the stairs, nearly knocking over Mademoiselle Mathilde, who was coming in through the *porte-cochère*. She did not recognize him ; but merely saying, "Eh, eh, young man, look what you are about," took her way up stairs to the studio, whilst Humphrey pursued his into the street. It was snowing fast now, a snow that left no compensating whiteness, but melted into mud as it fell ; but he hardly noticed it. He took no heed that he was cold and wet ; he forgot that he was hungry ; it seemed to him but one long minute of fiery impulse from the moment of his leaving his master's studio, to that when he reached his own door in the Rue de Seine, and dashing up stairs two steps at a time, shut himself up in the loneliness of his room.

There the chill darkness subdued him. Without caring to strike a light, he threw himself on the low bed, and sat with his head in his hand staring blankly through the gloom at the outline of the windows defined by the dim snow twilight without, the waves of passion slowly ebbing as the cold gained upon him. What after all had he been doing all this time ? Why should he hold aloof from the voice, the eyes, the sweet presence, that were his life ? Had he not as much right as another. . . . ? He kept asking himself with a sort of dull anger and misery. To the poor lad, sitting there shivering in the dark, that brief visit to the studio seemed like some door that had opened suddenly on the blackness of his path to let out a flood of light and music, then shut again leaving the blackness tenfold intenser than before. What madness

had made him fly from her? And what hope remained if life were always to be a vain wrestling of blind impulses with wild unsatisfied longings? Humphrey did not dwell upon this last thought; he was too much preoccupied with the wretchedness of the present moment—only it seemed to hedge in this dreary hour with a future as dark as the past.

Suddenly he sprang up, animated by a new idea and a new hope. He groped about till he found a match, then striking it, lighted an end of candle, and began turning out drawers and boxes with renewed activity.

It was Wednesday evening, and one of Mrs. Grey's At Homes. Humphrey felt almost certain Ersilia would be there; he knew she went everywhere this winter with Mademoiselle Mathilde; he also felt almost certain that Mr. Fleming would not be there, for he remembered how his master had once said that he always avoided Mrs. Grey's parties. Humphrey himself had some time ago received a card inviting him to these entertainments, but he had never yet been to one, on account, amongst other reasons, of certain deficiencies in his wardrobe which he had neither the ready-money nor the credit to supply. But now it all at once occurred to him, that nothing could be easier than to apply in such an emergency to one of his friends, who lived only a few doors off; he was about the same size as himself, and would, Humphrey knew, lend him anything he might want. He would go to him at once, he thought, as, after a useless search amongst his own things, he tumbled them back into their places. Nothing should make him give up this new hope of seeing Ersilia again that evening.

This friend, who became indeed in after-years one of Randolph's best and most valued friends, but who was at this time hardly more than a friendly acquaintance, was an Englishman of the name of Sterling, a few years older than Humphrey, an artist, like himself, but in comparatively easy circumstances. He had married a young Swiss governess about a twelvemonth before, out of compassion, his friends said, and now rented a modest apart-

ment on a third floor in the Rue de Seine. Humphrey found him at work in a small sitting-room, drawing on wood, by the light of a shaded lamp, whilst his young wife, with a sleeping infant on her knee, sat knitting by the fire. The lad, with an indifferent air, explained his errand as briefly as he could.

"You are welcome to anything I may have," said the other, "though, upon my word, I hardly know what I have got; it is so long since I have been to a party. But I will go and look out my things, and then you can come and help yourself."

He left the room, and Humphrey sat looking at this peaceful little interior where his friend lived and worked. Something of tranquil, as it were, immovable repose, seemed to pervade it, and struck upon the lad's wild and restless heart. The logs gently hissed and crackled, the babe slumbered, the knitting-needles clicked as the young mother, with swift-moving fingers, sat gazing into the fire. She was pretty, fair, and rather stupid-looking—in fact, she was rather stupid; but Humphrey, as he looked at her, thought dully he should like such a wife as this, not to talk to, not as a companion, but to sit silently, as she was doing now, a placid centre to his home when he should come in out of the cold and wet of a winter's night. He felt almost sorry, when his friend, returning, told him to go to his room, and see if there were anything that could be of use to him.

Humphrey, as we know, was not sensitive in the matter of clothes, and he presently returned, full of gratitude to Sterling, and slightly elated by his own graceful appearance in a coat that no short-sighted person, perhaps, would imagine had been made for anyone but himself. He shook hands cordially with his friends, but Sterling accompanied him out into the little entry, and stood chatting while Humphrey put on his greatcoat. He was a kindly young fellow of four or five-and-twenty, with bright blue eyes, and a most sweet and frank smile.

"How does your picture get on, Randolph?" he said, as he opened the door for him, "some one—I forget who

—told me great things of it. I want to come up and see it some afternoon.”

“I haven’t done much to it lately,” said Humphrey, “I’ll let you know when it is worth looking at. Good-night, Sterling, and thank you.”

He turned away in haste to be gone now, but at that moment another door opened, just opposite ; a clatter of plates and dishes made itself heard, a savory smell came stealing out on the landing. Humphrey had eaten nothing that day but a halfpenny roll, more than ten hours before ; a sick craving for food such as he had never before known, and which no amount of philosophical reflections, had he been capable of them at that moment, could have wholly counteracted, came over him. He hesitated for a moment, then turned back hastily.

“Sterling,” he said, “I am ashamed to trouble you any more, but—could you lend me five francs ?”

“Five francs !” said the other, feeling in his pocket, “I would with pleasure, my dear fellow, but the fact is, at this moment, I have not five francs, nor, I believe, five *sous* in the world. I paid the wood-merchant to-day, and it took all our ready cash. I am very sorry—I have a payment due to-morrow, and you can have what you like then, if that is any good to you.”

“Thank you, it is no matter,” said Humphrey rather ruefully, “I can do without.”

He was moving away again, but Sterling laid a hand on his arm and detained him.

“I beg your pardon, Randolph,” he said kindly, and coloring a little, “don’t think me impertinent, but I am afraid you are in trouble of some sort, and—well, I am older than you, and bought my own experience dearly enough a year or so ago. I don’t want to interfere, but if I can be of any use to you—I saw you last night—and on Sunday—”

“Confound it all !” cried Humphrey in a rage, “what the devil do I care what you saw ? I am competent to manage my own affairs, I hope.”

He rushed down stairs, but was up again before Sterling had time to shut the door.

"I beg your pardon, Sterling," he said, wringing both his hands. "I think you are the best and kindest fellow alive; but I am the most miserable wretch on earth, and I—I have got no home, and when that's the case, it doesn't much matter what becomes of a fellow—," and he was off again before his friend could reply.

Mrs. Grey's parties were always early; from eight to eleven she wrote upon her cards, and for this she had her own reasons to give to her friends. "I do not care about giving late parties," she used to say, "if one has young people to entertain, it is another thing; in my own young days I delighted in a dance, and when Rose is grown up it will be different. But Charlotte," with a glance at the girl, "does not profess to care about dancing, so that I am free to follow my own tastes, and those of my friends. I love to gather round me the élite of the literary world, and I know what artists, and authors, and—and—artists in short are. They will sit up all night to work; their happiest moments of inspiration are towards two o'clock in the morning; but after dinner they enjoy a few hours of repose and recreation. And that is what I endeavor to give them; music and conversation—nothing more; some light refreshments, and strong coffee at the end of the evening to prepare them for their after labors."

To do Mrs. Grey justice, her parties were, I believe, always agreeable. She did, as a fact, know a great variety of people, and she had the art of getting them together. She took care to provide good music and good refreshments, and her rooms were generally well-filled.

Humphrey arrived not long after eight, and the first person he saw was Mademoiselle Mathilde, sitting on a sofa, in the little room where he had once had a memorable interview with Charlotte. He was glad to see her friendly old face there, and went up at once to speak to her.

"It is you, Monsieur Humphrey, is it?" she said; "well, you need not come and talk to me; I have nothing to say to you."

"What have I done, Mademoiselle?" said Humphrey, taken aback.

"What have you done? Why have you never been to see me all this time? I asked you to come, and you have never been near us. No, you need not apologize; you were welcome to stay away if you liked, but I am an old woman, and I don't expect young men to give themselves airs with me. I am quite in earnest; I am not going to talk to you, and you may go away," and Mademoiselle Mathilde, putting up her fan, began an animated conversation with an old gentleman who was sitting next to her.

Humphrey walked away, sore at heart with this rebuff from his old friend. Every one was against him, the lad thought bitterly, as he passed on into the larger room beyond, to see if a more friendly greeting awaited him there.

He found a great many lights, a heated atmosphere, a throng of strange faces, English and foreign, deft waiters moving about with ices and glasses of colored syrups, a faint sound of music from an adjoining room audible above the hum of voices. Mrs. Grey came flitting by on the arm of an elderly gentleman.

"I am fortunate enough to possess one or two gems of my own," Humphrey heard her saying. "A Gainsborough, a Sir Joshua, two Romneys—I must show them to you, Sir John. I call them my passport to the world of art. How do you do, Mr. Randolph, I am delighted to see you here this evening; *when* are we to have that day at the Louvre together? This way, Sir John."

"Do you know who is playing in the next room?" said Humphrey to a red-bearded man standing next to him.

"I am not sure—Signor S——" (a well known violinist), "I believe, and the Princess Zaraikine. But there is such a crowd there is no getting in. The piano ought not to be put in that room; I have told Mrs. Grey so, but she says people as a rule prefer conversation to music. I prefer music myself, when I can get it without being suffocated."

He sauntered off, whilst Humphrey made his way across the salon, and joined the little throng of black coats gathered round the doorway leading into the music

room. The piano was at the further end, and from where he stood he could not see the player, but he thought he recognized Ersilia's touch ; on the right hand sat the violinist swaying to and fro over his music. Silent rows of people were seated down the long, narrow room, with the look of resignation that is apt to characterize the musical audience of a drawing-room fixed beyond hope of release ; knots of men stood about with an air of keen enjoyment, and there was an irregular circle round the piano in the midst of which, Humphrey immediately distinguished Mr. Fleming. He was there, then, after all, the lad thought ; he was there, though he had felt sure he would not come.

This discovery, which two minutes of rational reflection would have enabled him to foresee, was like a slight shock to Humphrey ; he stood leaning against the doorway with folded arms, but for a moment he neither saw nor heard what was going on, and it was nearly a minute before, looking up, he noticed a little figure standing just within the music-room. She was leaning with her hands pressed back against the wall, and two little satin feet pushed forward, her wide, dark eyes fixed in an abstracted gaze, her yellow silk locks escaping on to her muslin frock. The girl looked so pretty in her unconscious attitude, that Humphrey could not help smiling with involuntary pleasure, and perhaps the smile had a magnetic influence, for in a moment Charlotte turned her head. She smiled and blushed too, when she caught sight of Humphrey, and came pressing through the people to put her little hand in his.

"I am so glad to see you, Mr. Randolph," she said, "I thought you never meant to come to our parties."

"I have been wanting to see you too, Miss Grey," he answered ; "but it is of no use calling here, you are never at home. I went to the studio this afternoon, thinking I might perhaps find you there."

"I have not been for a long time," said Charlotte. "The Princess Zاراikine has not been sitting for her portrait lately, you know. Have you not been there

either, Mr. Randolph? You look as if you had been working too hard. Aunt Maria says that all artists work too hard—that their brains wear them out. You must not do that, Mr. Randolph.” And little Charlotte gave him a kind look out of her dark eyes that Humphrey felt he did not deserve.

“I have not been working at all, Miss Grey,” he said; “not in that way. I have been a great deal with your friend lately, and that was why I wanted to see you. I thought you would like to know that he is much better now; he hopes to go out in a day or two.”

“Yes, I know—” said Charlotte, “at least,” she went on blushing and looking down, “I supposed so—you would have told me if he had been worse.”

There was a clapping of hands all round them; the sonata had finished with applause, and the people came crowding out of the music-room. Humphrey stood aside to let them pass, and when he turned to speak to Charlotte again, he found that she had slipped away, and was at the other end of the room. He looked after her puzzled. Was the girl wholly disingenuous, or had she become simply indifferent? She looked ingenuous, he thought, and yet—it was a problem he could not solve, and indeed the next minute it had passed from his mind. She had disappeared amongst the crowd, and he had gone back to the music-room.

It was nearly empty now, pending the next performance, and Humphrey had no difficulty in seeing Ersilia, who had not yet left her place at the piano. She was sitting a little turned away, talking music, as people who love music are wont to do, with the violinist, whilst Mr. Fleming, with his arms resting on the back of his chair, joined in with an occasional word. He nodded as Humphrey came up, but the others did not notice the lad, who stood on one side listening and looking on. The violinist was an old man of vehement gestures, with a yellow, deeply-lined face, and black eyes of great fire and intelligence. Now and then, as he talked, he struck an impetuous chord, or played a few stammering bars; then as Ersilia caught

the meaning, some air grew into clearness on the piano, caught up and rounded into perfect harmony by the fulfilling tones of the violin, till, ceasing abruptly as it had begun, the conversation went on as before. They were talking Italian ; but gestures have an eloquence of their own, and it seemed to Humphrey, who could not understand a word that they said, that no word of their meaning was lost to him.

Presently, however, a Frenchman, coming up, at once changed the language and the conversation. He stood chatting for a few moments, and then claimed the violinist's company elsewhere, on the plea of a prior engagement. The old Italian turned with a profound bow to Ersilia, who, as she rose from the piano, said, "On Friday, then, Monsieur, at two o'clock, I may hope to have the pleasure of seeing you."

"Ah, Madame," he said, laying his hand on his heart, and in his imperfect French, "would that every day were Friday, and every hour the hour of two. To play with you is to be possessed with a double soul, a second soul that speaks in harmony with the first, yet is infinitely above it. I think that so we shall make music in Paradise."

He spoke with an inexpressible earnestness, which took all sense of hyperbole from his words, and imposed a moment's silence on his hearers. Then Ersilia, flushing, and with a sweet and cordial grace that I cannot describe, gave her hand to the old man.

"Thank you," she said ; "I know what you mean, though I could not have put it into words, for I too have felt it this evening. I hope we shall often play together."

It was just then that turning round with the flush still on her cheek she saw Humphrey, who had come forward, and was leaning with his arms on the piano. She smiled as though well pleased to see him there, and he was encouraged to make a request.

"Will you play me something before you go ?" he said. "It is long since I have heard you."

"With pleasure," she said, sitting down again at once. "What shall it be ?"

"Something that you used to play in the Pyrenees," he said ; for indeed some subtle links of association had recalled to him strongly that last evening at the Eaux-Bonnes, when the wax lights shining as now on open folios and ivory keys, on Ersilia in her soft white draperies and yellow lace, had made an enchanted circle from which he had been held apart. She began an air of Mozart's, but she had hardly played three bars when Mr. Fleming, who had gone away, returned and said something in a low voice. She listened with suspended fingers, then rose at once and took up her gloves.

"Will you excuse me, Humphrey?" she said. "It will be for another time. I am wanted just now in the other room."

She moved away, and Humphrey remained standing and looking gloomily at the place where she had been. It was only a trifle ; but there are times of physical susceptibility when a pin prick would be torture, and Humphrey was in the tragic mood in which trifles cease to exist, and each separate moment seems fateful. Mrs. Grey's voice in his ear just then seemed about as well-timed as the aimless clatter of a child's rattle.

"We are going to have some more music," she said cheerfully ; "a young lady singer whom I am anxious to bring forward. I love to encourage talent, Mr. Randolph, where it is possible, but with my limited means it is but little that I can do. The purchase of pictures, for example, is impossible to me, though in that respect indeed I consider myself fortunate. I possess one or two gems of my own, you know—a Gains—— You have seen them, of course, Mr. Randolph?"

Now it so happened that, much as Randolph had heard of these famous gems of art, he had not seen them, for Mrs. Grey kept them secluded in a small room apart, fearing no doubt that, were they hung in a mere drawing-room or dining-room, they might be looked upon by the uninitiated as simply fine family portraits, and not as Mrs. Grey's passport to the world of art. Humphrey, therefore, was obliged now, however reluctantly, to follow

her through crimson curtains into a small crimson-lined room.

"I call this my sanctuary of art, the nucleus of my picture-gallery, if I had one," said Mrs. Grey. "This paper was chosen on purpose; I thought it would show off the pearly tints, and the powdered hair, and—and the pearly tints, in short, that are so much admired, to the best advantage."

"They seem to be very fine paintings," said Humphrey, going from one to another and examining them. "They are all family portraits, I suppose?"

"My husband's family—yes; my Rose's ancestors. I hope one day to have her own portrait painted, dear child, and placed amongst them."

"You would hardly have room here," said Humphrey, glancing round. "Don't you think they would look better in one of your larger rooms, Mrs. Grey? They seem rather crowded here."

"I think not—others have said the same thing, but I think not," Mrs. Grey answered. "You see there is nothing here to distract the attention, no furniture, no china, no books. And that is what I like; for it is a fault I have sometimes found in the *ateliers* of artists themselves—that there is too much to see, too much to admire. And talking of *ateliers* reminds me, Mr. Randolph, how much, how very much we shall miss Mr. Fleming when he is gone."

"When he is gone?" said Humphrey, staring.

"Yes, when he is gone to Florence, you know. I hear that he is to start almost immediately, and to be absent many months. It is an Englishman, I understand, who has lately built a house—a palace rather—and wishes it decorated in fresco by the first artists of the day. That is the sort of thing that fills me with envy, Mr. Randolph; it is so entirely what I should like myself if I had but the means. Have you quite done here? Shall we return into the other room? I think I hear my young friend singing."

Humphrey mechanically held aside the curtain to let Mrs. Grey pass, and followed her into the music-room.

"Ahimé!" sang the young lady, at the top of her voice, with a heart-broken drop on to the key note. "Bravo, bravo!" cried all the people standing round. Humphrey made his way through them all; he had but one thought now—to find Mademoiselle Mathilde and ascertain from her the truth of what Mrs. Grey had been saying. She would know; she would tell him everything.

Mademoiselle Mathilde was still sitting where he had left her, but the old gentleman was gone, and the place beside her on the sofa was vacant. She looked up at the lad with a good-humored twinkle in her old eyes.

"You may come and talk to me now," she said, "yes, I forgive you, for I see you have put on your best coat on purpose to please me. Where *did* you get that coat, Mr. Humphrey? It looks as if it had been made twenty years ago for somebody else."

"Don't, Mademoiselle," said Humphrey imploringly. He was indifferent to the criticism on his coat, but he was in no mood to joke about anything. "I want you to tell me about Mr. Fleming," he said quickly. "Is it true he is going away? He has said nothing about it to me."

"If you paid a little more attention to your work and to your friends, you would know more of what is going on," said Mademoiselle Mathilde, severely; then relenting, "it has only been settled a day or two," she said, "no doubt you would soon have heard of it from Mr. Fleming himself."

"It is true—he told me this afternoon he had some arrangements to make," said Humphrey, confounded, "but I never thought—when does he go, Mademoiselle? I was told almost immediately."

"Not immediately—not for nearly three weeks," said Mademoiselle Mathilde, with some irritation, "there is plenty of time to arrange everything."

"But the marriage—the Princess Zaraikine—is the marriage postponed?" said Humphrey confusedly; "it was to have been immediately after Easter."

"Postponed? certainly not, why should it be post-

poned?" said Mademoiselle Mathilde very crossly. "What do you take me for, Mr. Humphrey? People can be married before Easter as well as after, I suppose; it is not even Lent yet. Why should it be postponed? They have been engaged ever since last September, and that is long enough in all conscience. They will be married before they go, of course. What is Mr. Fleming to do all by himself in Florence? I am much better able to take care of myself than he is, as I tell Ersilia. I have looked after myself for the last fifty years, and can for fifty more, if necessary. But there is not the slightest occasion for talking about it; the wedding will be an extremely quiet one, and—we will let the subject alone for the present, if you please."

Mademoiselle Mathilde having made this unconscious revelation of her own inward conflict, got up, and without another word or look walked away into the next room. Humphrey sat as if stunned for a minute, and then he too got up, and walked straight out of the room into the entry where the coats and hats were piled. As he passed along, he saw through a half-open door into an empty room, where a buffet was being prepared for guests who might be supposed to be hungry later on. The lad felt half famished, but he did not dare go in; a wild demon seemed to be leaping at his heart, that he felt might at any moment break forth in ungovernable action. He made his way out quickly. As he went down the stairs, he passed people on their way up; it was still early; he had been there scarcely an hour.

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CHAPTER XXI.

A Dark Hour.

RANDOLPH walked straight into Monsieur Rossel's room on his return from Mrs. Grey's party. He had no fixed purpose in doing so ; but he shrank from the desolation of his own dreary apartment, where a chaos of miserable, distracted thoughts awaited him, and under all the myriad roofs of Paris spreading wide beneath the darkness, this seemed to him the only spot where a lighted hearth and an unquestioning welcome awaited him.

Monsieur Rossel was pacing up and down the room with his hands behind him, as was his habit now he had regained sufficient strength to move about. He paused in his walk, however, as Humphrey came in.

"You have returned, Randolph," he said. "I am glad of that, for I have a paper here that I particularly want copied out this evening. Perhaps you could do it for me now ; I have been writing all the afternoon, and my hand is too tired to do any more work to-night."

He seated himself in his arm-chair, and Humphrey, without speaking, took his accustomed place opposite. His fingers moved uncertainly amongst the papers for a moment, then his hands dropped and he sat motionless. Monsieur Rossel, who was turning over a writing-portfolio, looked up, and for the first time noticed the sick whiteness of the lad's face.

"Good Heavens, Randolph, what is the matter?" he said. "Are you ill? Will you have anything? When did you dine?"

"I have had no dinner," said Humphrey, incapable of more than this simple statement of fact.

"And I have none to offer you—I dined two hours ago. But I can give you a glass of wine in a minute," said Monsieur Rossel, rising stiffly and going to a cupboard by the fireplace. "The excellent wife of the porter insists upon showering bottles of wine upon me," he said, returning, "though she knows I am not allowed to drink any. Have some, my good boy; you look half-dead. What could induce you to go without your dinner?"

He poured out a glass and gave it to the lad, who drank it eagerly, and then another. It revived him; for, exhausted as he already was, he had felt really faint on coming out of the cold into the sudden warmth.

"It is not that," he said, after a minute. "Good Heavens, Monsieur, do you think I am a girl, to care for the loss of my dinner? If it were only that—" he paused for a moment, and then went on rapidly and very excitedly. "I have seen her to-day," he said, "and him too, and I wish I were dead—I wish I were dead. She avoids me, she hardly speaks to me—he makes her avoid me. She spoke coldly to me this afternoon; she never did so before. I would have died sooner than that she should speak and look at me so—and it was his doing. What right has he? I knew her first. I—loved her first. I was happy till he came."

He flung his arms over the back of his chair, and sat so, with his face turned away. M. Rossel had taken up the tongs to mend the fire, and did not at once answer.

"You are a fool, Randolph," he said at last, not unkindly, "take some more wine, my good boy, and be a man. You may believe me, for I have seen something of the world, when I tell you you had much better give up all thoughts of the Princess Zaraikine—except as a cousin and so forth—no possible good can come of anything else; that you may take my word for. When does this marriage take place? Not yet, I think you said?"

"That is all altered," said Humphrey, without moving, "it is to be in less than three weeks."

A heavy log slipped at that moment, and fell spluttering on to the hearth. Humphrey started forward and took the tongs from M. Rossel's hand to replace it.

"Thank you," he said, "my hand is so weak to-night, I can hold nothing. Three weeks do you say? How is that? I thought it was not to be till after Easter."

"Mr. Fleming is going to Italy—to Florence," said Humphrey, "the marriage is to take place before he goes."

He threw himself into his chair again and remained motionless as before, whilst M. Rossel stood silent by the mantel-piece. Presently he gave a short laugh, then another. Humphrey looked around savagely.

"Why do you laugh?" he said, "I see nothing ludicrous in it."

"There is something ludicrous in most things, my dear fellow—except rheumatic gout, perhaps; I never yet could discover a comic side to that. However, you are right enough in one sense; this marriage is no laughing matter—the devil is in it, I believe—I don't know what to do You are an honest lad, Randolph; I have half a mind to trust you—"

He stood looking at him irresolutely for a moment, and then shaking his head, turned away and began walking up and down the room again. Was Humphrey utterly blind? He thought so afterwards on looking back, and yet at the time he was giddy, confused, exhausted, preoccupied with his own miseries—no, he does not wonder that he suspected nothing. He sat with his head leaning on his hand, and a thousand intense thoughts flitting through his brain. The wine was before him; he had not yet had much, but what he had taken had gone at once to his head, as was natural after his hours of fasting, and he was in the state in which every perception seems quickened as the reasoning powers grow confused.

It seemed a long time before M. Rossel came back to his chair and seated himself with the air of a man who has thoroughly made up his mind.

"Randolph," he said, "listen to me. You are almost the only relation the Princess Zaraikine has in the world, I believe?"

"Well," said Humphrey, starting, "what then?"

"You have her interests at heart?"

"Of course," said the lad, impatiently, "what then?"

"Only this—that, on my word of honor as a gentleman, your cousin's marriage with Mr. Fleming can only be the cause of ultimate misery to her, and that as her only near relation, it should be your part to prevent, or at least delay it."

He spoke with a grave seriousness unusual in him; it impressed Humphrey with the conviction that he was speaking the truth, and he sat confounded.

"What do you mean?" he said at last. "I don't understand—I prevent it? Why should she not marry Mr. Fleming?"

"That is what I will explain; I will lay the facts before you—then you can judge for yourself. Whilst there was no immediate prospect of the marriage, I was silent; much might have happened between this and Easter. But now the case is different. You must forgive me if I give you pain, Randolph; you have or had an affection for Mr. Fleming, I know, but it is best to be plain with you, and the fact is, there are certain circumstances in his past life with which I happen to be acquainted—"

"In Mr. Fleming's!" broke in Humphrey, indignantly, and speaking from old habit and impulse, "I don't believe a word of it. He is the best and noblest of men."

"That is to say, my good fellow, he paints fine pictures, and has done you some kindness," said M. Rosset, speaking more in his usual manner; "that, I take it, is about all you know of him?"

Humphrey was silent; what indeed did he know of Mr. Fleming's past life? He could have only opposed to M. Rosset his own young generous belief in the goodness that had shown itself to him in a thousand ways, and who shall say how much this had been dimmed by his habit of thought in these last few months?

"These are qualities, Randolph," M. Rossel continued, "which, however estimable in themselves, go but a little way in social relations with the world at large. I know nothing of Mr. Fleming personally, but from what I have heard of him, I should judge him to have the faults of a weak character, the most fatal perhaps to the happiness of others. You yourself, if I understand you rightly, have found him not incapable of an ungenerous effort to injure you in your cousin's opinion, and alienate her from you."

"It is true," said Humphrey. At another time he would have resented this direct interpretation of his own vague statements; but now, in his heated brain, his misty grievances had assumed a vivid outline and coloring they had never had before. "It is true," he said passionately, "he came between us at the first, and it has been so ever since. It was like Paradise till he came. We were together always—in the mountains, in the forests, at home, everywhere. She liked to have me with her, she said so; she liked talking to me, till he came—and then everything was changed, and it was his doing. This very evening—" His voice choked and he was silent for a moment. "And yet I can't believe it," he went on, with a sort of angry sob, "I can't believe any harm of him. I loved him; oh God, I loved him so! I thought he was the best friend I ever had."

"My good boy," said M. Rossel, "your love for Mr. Fleming, which does you every honor, can in no way influence—take some more wine; you have not got your color back yet—I say it can in no way influence your cousin's future happiness, and it is that which concerns us now. I tell you again solemnly, if you do not in some way interfere to prevent, or at any rate delay, this marriage, you may repent it for her sake to the end of your days."

Humphrey, who had started up in his agitation, sat down again, looking at M. Rossel in blank bewilderment. He could not reason; he could only meet each proposition as it arose.

"What can I do?" he said helplessly; "if what you say is true, I would do anything—anything in the world to help her. But I can do nothing."

"On the contrary, my dear fellow, you are the only person who can do anything, otherwise I would not have troubled you," answered M. Rossel; then speaking each word with clearness and precision, "You can do this for instance," he said, "I can dictate to you a plain statement of these facts that have come to my knowledge. You can judge for yourself how far they are likely to affect your cousin's future welfare, and you can then, if you think proper, send this statement in the form of a letter to the Princess Zaraikine."

"I? Never!" said Humphrey; "she would never speak to me again."

"Possibly not," said M. Rossel, "if she knows from whom it comes; but your name is not essential."

"An anonymous letter, and against Mr. Fleming?" cried the lad, starting up as if he had been stung. "Never, never!"

"As you like, my good fellow. There is a prejudice against anonymous letters, I am aware; a foolish one, it seems to me. It is sometimes highly desirable that information should be given, and equally desirable that the informant should not be known. The present is a case in point. However, do as you like; you can put your name if you think proper."

"No," said Humphrey, "no; I couldn't do that; she she would never speak to me again. I might write it," he went on, dreamily, "I might write it, I would do more than write a letter for her. I needn't send it unless I like." He sat silent for a while; then rousing himself with an effort at independent thought, "What are these facts?" he said, "and if you know them so well, why should you not go yourself to the Princess Zaraikine? That would make more impression on her than a letter."

"My good fellow," said M. Rossel, slightly shrugging his shoulders, "how can I go? You are not igno-

rant of my position ; you are aware that I have reasons for wishing my presence in Paris to be known to as few people as possible. As it is, I run some risk," he said slowly and reflectingly ; "but I see no other way—no other way. And the letter will not fail—I think not."

Humphrey did not reply. He had felt a passionate repulsion toward each proposition as M. Rossel made it ; but he had lost his hold on the relation of things, and now, unconsciously to himself, his confused mind was slipping away from the first question, whether the letter should be written at all, and was dwelling on quite secondary considerations. Presently, as though in a dream, he heard Monsieur Rossel speaking, and perhaps he answered him ; but when he had struggled back to a clear idea again, it was, so to speak, on an altogether different level.

"When this letter is written," he said, "how am I to get it to her?"

"By the post, I suppose," answered M. Rossel, "or stay—it is not late—it might perhaps be safer and quicker for Pierre (the porter's son) to take it to her house to-night."

"Why, Pierre?" said Humphrey, with a feeling of irritation. "Why should I trust Pierre? Why should I not take it myself?"

"You are known there, are you not?" said M. Rossel. "You might be recognized by the concierge. But you are perhaps right. The post will be safer."

"No," said Humphrey angrily, "I won't have it go by the post. It is not safer ; letters get lost by the post. Pierre shall take it. But hadn't you better write it?" he went on after a minute, "she'll recognize my writing."

"My good boy, I could not write another line to-night to save my life. But you can do what I cannot—not with any success that is—you can write a feigned hand. I know it ; for you have done it for me, if you remember."

"Oh yes," said Humphrey miserably, "I can write a feigned hand."

He thought he was standing by the mantel-piece when

he spoke, but all at once he seemed to wake up and find that he was seated at the table, with a sheet of paper before him and a pen in his hand. He held it suspended for a moment, then dropped it again. "I can't write now," he said; "won't it do to-morrow? I am tired, stupid, dizzy, I think."

"You are tired, of course, through want of food," said M. Rossel. "Take some more wine; that will do you good. It had better be written to-night, if possible."

Humphrey took up the pen again. What he wrote he could never afterwards remember, never afterwards knew. The words seemed to run in fire from his pen, and fade again into blankness on the page. . . A cold night wind blowing in his face all at once startled and confused him. He was no longer in M. Rossel's room; he was standing in the street below, with Pierre, a lad of twelve or fourteen, at his side.

It was through questioning Pierre the next day that Humphrey learnt most of the subsequent events of that evening. Monsieur l'Anglais, as he was generally called, had come down stairs, so the boy reported, about half-past ten, just as he (Pierre) was going to bed, and had asked him if he would take a message to the other end of the town. Pierre, glad to delay the fated bedtime, agreed to take the letter readily enough. He thought Monsieur l'Anglais looked rather queer; but did not suppose there was anything wrong till they got outside, and then he thought him very queer indeed, the boy said grinning. He had insisted on coming too, to show Pierre the way—as if Pierre had not known it ever since he was born, so to speak, and taking his arm, had talked without ceasing the whole time, only, as it was all in English, Pierre had not understood a word that he said. Arrived at the Princess Zاراїкіне's house, Monsieur l'Anglais would not come in, but had placed himself in a doorway nearly opposite, whilst Pierre left the letter, nor would he come away again, the boy declared, for all he could say; so at last he had left him there, and come home by himself. Humphrey, in fact, remembered stationing himself in the

doorway, with some vague notion of waiting there till he should see Ersilia return from Mrs. Grey's party, and perhaps he fell asleep, for it seemed a long time afterwards that he found himself walking dizzily along the quays and across the bridge on his way home. Then, all at once, something—he cannot recall what—startled him into a moment of intense consciousness, of wild exaltation that he can never forget. The weather had changed in these last few hours ; a rack of clouds tinged by the moon was being driven across the sky ; the snow had ceased, but a freezing wind had arisen, and bound together the last flakes into a thin white crust ; the streets were deserted, the lamps flickered as they shone reflected in the river ; and to the lad it seemed that all the earth lay still and wind swept and frozen beneath his feet, within his grasp, under those immense hurrying heavens. A sort of wild exaltation, I say, possessed him. What had he been doing ? What was he going to do ? Something that could change a life, could alter a destiny ? He, too, was not powerless then ; he too could control fate, work events, maintain his will. . . .

It was one of those dark moments that seem to verify the tales told of men who have sold their souls to win more than mortal power. But with Randolph, the reaction came the next moment with the freezing blast that swept across the bridge and chilled him through. He hurried home with shivering haste, and for the last time that day mounted what seemed endless flights of stairs to his own room ; then, all dressed as he was, he threw himself upon the bed, and drawing the coverings over him, in five minutes he was dead asleep.

CHAPTER XXII.

A Meeting in the Louvre.

HUMPHREY awoke the next morning cold, faint, and sick. A chill daylight came in through frosty panes half choked with snow ; it showed him his bare walls, his scanty furniture, his fireless grate where his last log had smouldered into a heap of white ashes three days ago. Last evening's events lay in his memory like a confused dream, nor had he yet the strength to disentangle them. He had a racking headache, his limbs felt benumbed ; he tried to rise, and fell back. For a moment he thought he was going to die there of cold and hunger, with not a soul to help him ; then with a new effort he dragged himself off the bed and got upon his feet.

Once risen he felt stronger. His first movement was to detach from its chain a gold watch that he habitually wore, and making his way down stairs he called to Pierre, who was used to run on his errands of every description.

"Pierre," he said, "take this watch for me and get as much money on it as you can ; and ask your mother if she will bring me up some wood and some coffee, I am not well this morning."

The watch had belonged to his uncle, Mr. Randolph, and had been given to him by Ersilia. Yesterday he had gone without food all day rather than part with her gift ; to-day what did it matter ? His remembrance of last night's events might be vague, but the sense of recklessness they had engendered was very real.

It was not long before the porter's wife, kindly bene-

factress to the fleeting population that alighted under the roof, appeared with hot coffee, followed by a boy carrying a load of wood. A fire was soon kindling and blazing; Humphrey was still in his friend's clothes that he had lain down in; but he changed them now for his every day attire, and by the time Pierre returned with the money, he was sitting, drinking his coffee in front of the fire, and vainly trying to recall all that had happened the night before. He questioned the boy, as I have said, and when Pierre went away he still sat with his aching head in his hand, striving, as his numbed consciousness revived, to supply each missing detail. It was in vain; nothing would come but remembrances such as he has endeavored to set down, of a confused brain growing more confused, of speeches that seemed to detach themselves without connecting thought, of a letter of hateful import which, look at it as he would, faded for ever into blankness. What had he written? What miserable lie had he dared to write concerning his master—his master on whose honor and good faith he was ready to stake his life almost? Had it reached Ersilia, and if so, what would happen? Good God! what would happen? What had he done?

Humphrey started up, crossed the passage, and without knocking, walked into the opposite room. Monsieur Rossel was already up, though it was before his usual hour of rising; he was seated at his table writing with as much rapidity as the weakness of his hand would allow.

Humphrey walked straight up to him.

"What did you make me write in that letter last night?" he said, in a voice hoarse with passionate emotion. "What infernal lies did you make me write?"

M. Rossel glanced up for a moment with keen eyes from his writing. "Have you heard any thing of it?" he said.

"Heard? No. What should I have heard? What is there to hear? For God's sake, Monsieur, tell me what was in it, and put me out of this torture."

"My good boy," said M. Rossel, "you have no need to trouble yourself further about the letter or its contents;

what was in it is of little importance except to those immediately concerned, and the whole thing, as it happens, may be of no consequence one way or another. We need not speak of it again."

"No consequence?" said Humphrey. "Is an infamous scandal of no consequence? Are lies of no consequence?—lies that may ruin the happiness of two people. And such happiness—" His voice choked.

"My good fellow," said M. Rossel, with some impatience, "you must excuse me if I ask you to leave me for the present. I have received letters of the utmost importance that I must answer at once. As regards the letter you speak of, it was open to you to write it or not, and I am sorry if it is giving you any uneasiness now; but last night you were only eager to have it sent. It was you yourself, as you may remember, who insisted that it should be taken as soon as it was written, when I wished to keep it till to-day."

"No," said Humphrey, "I remember nothing."

"And for the rest," M. Rossel continued, taking up his pen, "I imagined from what you said, that nothing that interfered with the marriage of the Princess Zaraikine would be displeasing to you."

"Not that," said Humphrey, "not that. God knows I never meant that."

He flung his arms against the wall, and stood with his face hidden in speechless despair. There was a few minutes' silence, broken only by the rustling of M. Rossel's papers and the scratching of his pen. Then Humphrey, without another word, turned to leave the room. He thought M. Rossel absorbed in his writing, but halfway to the door he was arrested by his voice.

"Randolph," he said, in tones that betrayed some anxiety, "you will of course, not mention my name in connection with this affair, whatever may happen. I trust to your honor, as you know, not to reveal my presence in Paris."

"My honor?" said Humphrey, bitterly. "You do well to trust to it when you have done your best to take it from

me. But you need not be afraid, you are safe with me." He left the room as he finished speaking, never to enter it again.

He went out into the streets. His passion was all gone ; he felt nothing but bitter remorse and despair as he walked along with his hands in his pockets, his hat over his eyes. He turned into the first restaurant he came to, and ordered some breakfast ; he could pay for it now with money that to his exaggerated thought seemed the price of his own honor, and when he had done, he still sat at the little table set in a corner of the room, feeling, rather than thinking. He shrank now from dwelling on the thought of last night. M. Rossel's words that had most impressed him then with the weight of conviction, had faded into nothing now. The whole thing was a lie—he no more doubted it than that the sun was in the heavens, and whether M. Rossel had believed it to be true, or whether he had acted as he did from any other motive, Humphrey did not care to consider ; he had enough to do with his own share in that dark hour, towards which all the mad jealousy and discontent of the last few months seemed to him to have been tending. And yet even that was not what oppressed him most ; it was the thing itself, and the misery that it might have worked that was weighing him down, not that he had done it—that was a bitterness he would taste more fully later on. He had no thought of confession ; he had no thought of action of any kind ; it seemed to him that all action was over, and that he had only to sit and wait until whatever had happened, or was going to happen, should of itself come upon him and crush him. Each moment he expected the blow to fall, in the chance words of the passers-by, in a face looking in at the window, in the footsteps that passed and repassed him as he sat alone at his table ; and then at length he perceived that suspense had become intolerable, and starting up, he went out into the street again.

It was a clear, frosty day ; more snow had fallen after midnight, and it lay thick and smooth and sparkling

everywhere ; all Paris was abroad and joyous in the bright sunshine, under the clear blue sky—so it seemed to Humphrey as he crossed the Boulevards, and made his way up the Chaussée d'Antin to the Rue de Clichy. He would go to the studio, he thought ; he would go in and know the worst at once ; he should be able to read it all in his master's face. But when his foot was on the first step of the staircase his courage failed ; a sickening dread came over him, and he turned away.

Where was he to go ? What was he to do ? How learn the truth that he had no strength to read in the faces of those he loved ? Humphrey thought of the doorway of which mention has more than once been made. He had not frequented it lately, but now nothing better suggested itself to him than to go and place himself there once more. Some word, some sign must surely come, some face appearing at a window, some passing glimpse of Ersilia that would tell him all.

There was an old woman with a charcoal pan for roasting chestnuts who occupied an opposite corner of the doorway to that in which Humphrey generally stood. Her presence there had disturbed him at first ; but he had ended by getting accustomed to it, whilst she, on her side, showed from the first a lively interest in his proceedings, and a perfect comprehension of what brought him there. To-day, as he came up, she greeted him with a nod and a look of intelligence.

"*Elle est sortie*," she said, and then, as he paid no heed, "*elle est sortie*," she said again, and nodded her head till some customers coming up drew her attention elsewhere.

Humphrey, in fact, heard her without hearing ; but presently, as he stood in his dark corner, cold and suspense began to gain upon him, and her remembered words gave him the courage he would hardly have found otherwise, to cross the road and make inquiries at the house itself. The Princess Zaraikine was not at home, the concierge said ; she had gone out almost immediately after the eleven o'clock *déjeuner*. When would she

return? Impossible to say. An English lady had breakfasted with her, and they had gone out together. Was Madame la Princess well? He believed so; he had hardly seen her that morning; she had come down stairs with her veil on, had gone straight to her carriage with the other lady, and they had driven off at once.

The story did not reassure Humphrey, open as he was to every suggestion of alarm. Who could her English friend be? Could she have sent for anyone— He would not finish the sentence even to himself. It was a thought that maddened him, and he turned away quickly to escape from it.

All that forenoon he wandered to and fro, with the sense of unreality that belongs to crises in our lives. Twice he went back to the Rue de Clichy, and stood gazing up, but no sign came from the half-shuttered windows. Twice he returned to take up his station in the doorway, and each time the old woman, whom he was beginning to hate for meaning looks, shook her head as he appeared. Weary at last of this fruitless waiting, he made his way down to the more frequented parts of the town. He walked up and down the Boulevards, he lingered under the arcades of the Rue de Rivoli, under the snow-laden trees in the Tuileries Gardens, miserable and alone. He met no one that he knew, and yet he felt as though each passer-by must single him out, as though this deed, which with awful swiftness had bound itself up with his whole identity, must be an open secret, known to, and yet hidden away from all the world. It is this sense of hateful fellowship with hidden sin, apart from our fellow-men, that makes its first and worst punishment, and herein, I suppose, lies some of the virtue of confession—that by his own acknowledgment a man renounces all connection with the evil thing, and sets it away from him for ever. But Humphrey, as I have said, had no thought of confession then; he knew of no words that could undo the evil he had done. Only the guilty consciousness oppressed him more and more.

At length, worn out, and wretched with a dull hope-

lessness that had come as a reaction from his long-sustained suspense, he turned into the Louvre. It was late in the afternoon now, and the shadows were gaining fast upon the sunlit spaces of snow; but he thought he might find here a half-hour's refuge from the crowds and bustle that distracted him outside. Presently he would resume his wanderings. He made his way down the long, many-windowed rooms, seeing, without noting, each familiar object, till he reached the picture-galleries. He stood for a while looking up at the Wreck of the Medusa, thinking, perhaps, that there might be more fatal wrecks in life than even that—more desperate hearts tossed upon stormier waves; then, passing down the Salle d'Apollon, he entered the Salon Carré. He went in listlessly, as one who knows what he is going to see and cares not at all for it; but all at once his heart stood still, then began to beat. Two ladies were standing together nearly opposite to him on the other side of the room; he could not see their faces, for they were looking at the pictures, but one at least of them he could not mistake. He knew that tall, slender, gracious form in some dark-flowing dress; he knew those superb furs, the gift of a Russian mother-in-law—in a word, he knew Ersilia.

Never in his life, perhaps, did Humphrey dread anything as he dreaded facing Ersilia at that moment; nevertheless, his feet, as of their own accord, began to move, dragging him across the room amongst the easels to the spot where she was standing with her friend. They were looking at Van Eyck's Coronation of the Virgin, and Ersilia was speaking as Humphrey came up.

"I have sometimes thought," she was saying, "that if I ever lost my faith in the existence of a hidden beauty for men to strive after, I should come to renew it at this picture."

"What do you mean, my dear?" said her companion. "You know I do not always see with your eyes."

"Do you not know," she said, "I so often think, in looking round me, of the beauty that lies locked away, as

it were, from almost all of us, till some one comes who can reveal it, and gives us a transfigured world like this— But I can imagine that one might forget it under some circumstances, and then, as I say, I should like to learn my faith over again here.” She was silent for a moment, looking at the picture ; then taking out her watch, “ We must go,” she said, “ it is getting late. Charlotte— where is Charlotte ? ” She turned round as she spoke, and came face to face with Humphrey.

No self-command could have kept the blood from rushing to Humphrey’s face at that moment, and then retreating, leaving a cold, sick sensation that he felt sure must betray itself in his looks. He could not tell whether Ersilia noticed it ; he could not raise his eyes to her face, only presently, as though from far off, he heard her voice speaking to him as usual.

“ I am glad to have met you, Humphrey,” she said, in her kind tones ; “ this is my friend Mrs. Sidney, of whom you have heard me speak.”

Obliged to look up and take an offered hand, Humphrey saw a lady a few years older than the Princess Zarakine, shorter and less slender, and plainly dressed in black. She had one of those calm faces, with bright hair and clear, loving eyes, that retain their look of youth far into the middle age ; but at this time, owing, perhaps, to some premature lines, and the sedate simplicity of her dress, she looked older than she really was. It was a face Humphrey came to know well in after-days, but he hardly noted it now, for as he raised his head he took courage to look at Ersilia. She was pale—yes, she was certainly pale, and her eyes looked heavy, he thought ; but in them he could read nothing but the sweet anxiety he had noticed more than once before when she was speaking to him, and they brightened with a smile as she met his momentary glance.

“ Mrs. Sidney is staying in Paris for a few days,” she said, “ and I have brought her with me to the Louvre, lest she should forget there are such things as pictures in the world.”

"You do not care for pictures?" said Humphrey, forced to say something, and turning to Mrs. Sidney.

"Frankly, not so much as for some other things," she answered. "I am always willing to take a lesson though, and do my best to understand them."

"Don't you really understand pictures?" said Charlotte. She had appeared from behind a big easel, and shaken hands with Humphrey, but rather avoided him, the lad fancied. "I cannot understand pictures either," she said, "only sometimes I like them, when they have little children in them—like Mr. Randolph's drawings," looking shyly at him.

"You are fond of little children, my dear?" said Mrs. Sidney. "So am I. I have a whole nursery full of them at home, who come every day to be taken care of. When you are next in London you must come with me to see them."

"Yes," said Charlotte, with brightening eyes, "I should like that."

"You must take me to your nursery, too, Frances," said Ersilia smiling, "lest I should forget there are such things as babies in the world." Then turning to Humphrey, and holding out her hand, "We must go now, Humphrey," she said, "we have an appointment at the studio ; but I want you to come and see me one day soon. I am going to La Chênaie next week, as you know. Can you come, do you think, before that?"

"Yes," he said, without looking up, "I will come." He shook hands silently with Mrs. Sidney, and as they moved towards the door, he walked on into the next gallery.

He walked on, shaken with a pent up emotion that he felt was making his face rigid and his lips white. Ersilia's words, her sweet unconscious smile, had roused in him a passion of remorse and self-despair such as he had never known before. And yet he felt relieved—yes, as he grew calmer he was conscious of a sense of relief, for the worst that he had dreaded had not come. That brief every-day conversation breaking into the midst of his

fears had dispelled them for the time. What had he feared ? He could hardly have told ; something threatening, dreadful, fatal to the happiness of those he loved. He felt relieved, but there was a weight that grew heavier every moment—the weight that had held his eyes when he would have met Ersilia's glance.

Presently, as it grew dusk, he left the Louvre. The weary day that had seemed so endless was coming to an end at last. The sun had set red and clear ; the moon was rising over the city, which, with its snowy roof and snowy pavements, its yellow lamps and lights kindling in every window, looked as though built of pure translucent marble—an exquisite dream city, set in the crystalline blue of the winter sky. Humphrey had no heart for the beauty, which oppressed him like a vain longing. He fled from it all, hastening to shut it out in the heat and glare of a cheap restaurant.

He ordered some dinner, but when it presently came he found he could not eat it. A new thought had taken possession of him. What if Ersilia had not yet received the letter, the miserable cause of all this misery ? Letters were often delayed or forgotten, and it might be lying in wait for her even now, dependent on the memory of the concierge. Humphrey sprang up at the thought. He might yet be in time to get possession of it, to destroy it—all would be well, no one would know. . . . And then all at once a horror of concealment, of this new sense of dishonor that set him apart from his fellow-men and forbade him to meet Ersilia's eyes, came over him. With an impulse stronger than any that had gone before, he started once more for the Rue de Clichy.

CHAPTER XXIII.

Mr. Fleming's Love Story.

HUMPHREY did not go straight to the studio. The idea that the letter might have been forgotten still pressed upon him, and in the longing to save Ersilia a moment's pain he went round by her house on the chance of being able to recover it. But the concierge was out, no one else knew or had heard anything about it, and baffled here also, Humphrey went on his way.

All his courage was gone by the time he reached the studio door, and it was only the resolution that sometimes survives our impulses that gave him strength to go in. Mr. Fleming was at home ; he was standing in front of an easel at work on a design, and looked round cheerily as the lad came in.

"Here you are at last, Humphrey," he said, "I have been expecting you all day, my boy ; I have a number of things I want to talk to you about. Come and warm yourself first, though ; you look half frozen."

He threw another log on the fire and went back to his work, whilst Humphrey, coming up to the fireplace, leaned his folded arms on the mantel-piece and buried his face in them. There was a few minutes' silence, and then he felt Mr. Fleming's hand laid on his shoulder.

"There's something gone wrong, Humphrey," he said ; "I've suspected it the last two or three times I have seen you, but I have never had a chance of speaking to you before. What is the matter ? Out with it, my boy, don't be afraid. If you have got yourself into a scrape I'll help you out of it. Do you want money ?

Have you got into debt? Has anyone got a hold upon you? Only trust me, and I'll set it to rights."

Humphrey raised his head.

"Mr. Fleming," he said, "I don't ask for your help, or your—or anything, except to hear me, and then let me go away and never see you again." He paused for a moment, then with a desperate effort, "Did the Princess Zاراikine get a letter last night?" he said.

"She did get a letter certainly," said Mr. Fleming, in some surprise at the abrupt question. "What of it?"

"I mean a letter—not by the post—that was left for her—that she got when she came home from Mrs. Grey's party," said Humphrey incoherently.

"I know what you mean—a letter that was left for her by a boy, so the concierge said—and an infamous letter it was. How came you to know anything of it?"

"I—I wrote it," said Humphrey.

Mr. Fleming went back to his easel, and stood drawing for a minute before he answered. "What made you do that, my boy?" he said at last. "If you had been told anything you thought your cousin ought to know, why did you not go to her yourself? An anonymous letter is a shabby, dishonorable sort of thing, whatever its contents may be. I could not imagine who had written it; I never thought of you, Humphrey."

"She—she didn't believe it?" said Humphrey.

"Who? Your cousin? I don't believe she gave it a second thought, nor was it from her, you may be sure, that I heard of it. The way it happened was this. I went home with her after Mrs. Grey's party to fetch a book she had promised to lend me. The letter was given her as we came in; she thought from the writing it was a note she was expecting about some business of Mademoiselle de Brisac's, and gave it to her to open whilst she went to look for the volume. Mademoiselle de Brisac, in her first indignation at the contents, read it aloud, and handed it over to me. Your cousin returned at that moment; the letter was addressed to her, and I gave it to her of course. She glanced through it, and

threw it at once into the fire, and there was an end of it. I do not know that she has thought of it again."

Humphrey could not answer. The miserable futility of the whole thing, apart from all other considerations, struck him for the first time. Mr. Fleming laid down his crayon again, and, coming up to the fireplace, stood considering for a while.

"I don't ask you who your informant was, Humphrey," he said at last, "and I don't want to know. I was not aware that I had an enemy in the world, and if I have, I am willing he should remain in the obscurity he has been in hitherto. But I should like to tell you the real story, so that if you ever hear it distorted again, you may know what to answer." Humphrey tried to speak, but the words would not come, and Mr. Fleming went on. "The real facts are simple enough," he said; "it all happened years ago in Rome—not in Paris—when I was a young fellow, not much older than you, Humphrey. Giovanna—for Giovanna was her name, your informant was right upon that point—was a young Roman girl, the sister of one of my models, a great hulking brute of a fellow. She was not a model herself, but I got her to come and sit to me for a Proserpine in a picture I was then painting. She had one of the loveliest faces and loveliest smiles I ever saw—your cousin has something of her look when she smiles—I noticed it the first minute I saw her; but Giovanna was much younger, hardly sixteen. One day she came to me with red eyes. I asked her what was the matter. She burst into tears, and told me a pitiful history—that she had no parents; that this big brother, who was only a step-brother, and his wife, were the only relations she had in the world; that they beat her and half-starved her, and threatened to turn her out of doors, because she was a burden on them. I comforted her as well as I could, and gave her some good advice, I daresay; it was not much I could do for her. Two nights afterwards I went to dine with a friend at the other side of Rome; it was winter time, and it came on to snow heavily. He asked me to

stay. We sat up playing billiards nearly all night, and I did not get home till ten o'clock the next morning. The first person I saw was Giovanna, sitting on the stone staircase just outside my door. She had been there for hours, and was half-dead with cold. Her brother had wanted to make her do something—she would not tell me what—and, when she had refused, had turned her out of doors in the snowstorm in the middle of the night. She had come to me, poor child, not knowing, she said, where else to go, and had sat there awaiting my return. I made her come in and eat some breakfast, for she was half-starved as well as half-frozen, and then gave her a note that I had written, asking a lady whom I knew well to befriend the poor girl. Giovanna took the note, as she would have done anything I told her, I believe, and the lady, as I felt sure she would, took her in and sheltered her. Before the day was out she had found a place for her in an English family who were about to leave Rome, and who were glad to have a young Italian girl of gentle manners as nursemaid to their children. I saw her once more, and bade her farewell. I do not say it was not hard to part. Had I been in a position to keep a wife, I daresay I should have married her then and there—and repented it all my life afterwards ; but in those days I had hardly a penny in the world I could call my own. So Giovanna went away, and three weeks afterwards the news came that she was dead. She had caught cold on that bitter night when she had sat so long on the staircase ; it was increased on her journey, though I am sure all care was taken of her ; inflammation of the lungs came on, and she died."

Mr. Fleming was silent for a minute, then went on in a lighter tone.

"There you have the history of my first love, Humphrey," he said. "It is an old story now, and how it ever came to be revived, or how it took the shape in which you heard it, I do not know. Several people in Rome were acquainted with the circumstances at the time, but I have never spoken of it to anyone since, ex-

cept to your cousin, who had heard all about poor little Giovanna, weeks before your letter reached her."

"Mr. Fleming," said Humphrey, desperately, "nothing can make any difference in what I have done, but I give you my word of honor I don't know one word of what was in that infernal letter. I—I was drunk when I wrote it; I had had nothing to eat all day, and I took some wine, and—" and he broke down altogether.

"My poor boy," said Mr. Fleming, laying a kind hand upon his shoulder, "we have not been looking after you enough lately. I take blame to myself."

"Don't pity me, Sir, for God's sake don't pity me," said Humphrey; he hardly knew what he said. He turned away abruptly, and began walking up and down till he could find voice and strength to go on.

"You take this too much to heart, Humphrey," said Mr. Fleming, kindly, "You did a foolish thing, I need not tell you, and if it had given your cousin any uneasiness I might have found it harder to forgive. As it is, you have done your best to repair it, and no one can do more. Put it out of your mind altogether, my boy; the thing is over now, and no good can come of brooding over it."

"Mr. Fleming," said Humphrey, stopping in front of him, "I think I am the guiltiest wretch alive, and no goodness on your part can make me feel otherwise. I cannot stop here. I could not bear to see—to see her again. You must tell her what I have done, and I will go away, anywhere, I don't care where, so that she may never think of me again."

"There is no need of your cousin to know anything about it, Humphrey, unless you like," said Mr. Fleming.

"She must know," he answered; "I cannot breathe in the same world with her, and think she does not know me as I am. When I saw her in the Louvre to-day, and she spoke to me in her old way—and I thought she looked pale—and she smiled at me—by Heaven, Sir, if I had had a pistol, I think I should have blown

out my brains on the spot, and I could not endure it again. No, tell her everything, and I will never see her again. She will, she must hate me, and I could not bear that either. I will leave Paris to-morrow, to-night, I care little what becomes of me.

"I will tell her, certainly," said Mr. Fleming, "if you have such a strong feeling about it. Perhaps you are right, Humphrey, but there is no reason why you should leave Paris to-night, or to-morrow, or any time. Forgive yourself, my boy; this is your first duty, and set to your work again with fresh courage."

"I can't," he said, in a stifled voice, "I can't stay here. I kept away from her as long as I could, and when I saw her again yesterday I think it maddened me. Don't you understand? I too—I" He could not finish the sentence.

Mr. Fleming's countenance changed. "My poor boy, I do understand now," he said, "but I declare to you I never thought of this before—never. I have been strangely blind and neglectful, strangely blind, indeed; and yet I might have known—poor boy, poor boy!" He took two or three turns up and down the room; Humphrey had never seen him look so concerned.

"I think you are in the right, Humphrey," he said, coming up to him presently, and trying to speak cheerfully; "a thorough change will do more to clear your brains and give you fresh heart again than anything else. We must think what can be done."

"I must go at once," said Humphrey, "I cannot stop in Paris. To-morrow, next day—as soon as possible."

"You shall go, my boy; not to-morrow, perhaps, but as soon as we can arrange it," said Mr. Fleming. "I had made other plans," he went on, more slowly and reflecting: "It was to talk them over with you that I wished to see you to-day. You have heard, I believe, that I am thinking of going to Florence. An old friend of mine, who has lived there for many years, has lately lost his wife, and he has asked me to execute some frescoes in the interior of a small chapel he has had

built to her memory. I shall leave Paris in about three weeks, but I do not propose going straight to Florence. There is some business that must be attended to in London, and we shall probably go to La Chênaie for a few days. I expect to be in Florence about the beginning of March. My idea was, Humphrey, that you should stay here and finish your picture, which you had set your heart on sending to the London Academy—not that I urged that very strongly upon you, as you know,” he said, smiling; “still I was willing you should have your own way in the matter; and then later on, when I should have been glad of your help, you might have joined me at Florence, and got the benefit of studying in the galleries there.”

He paused, musing for a minute, whilst Humphrey stood by in silence. This goodness which had taken such detailed thought for his future overpowered him.

“But I see this will not do now,” Mr. Fleming went on. “What you want is a complete change of society and ideas. What do you say to going to Rome for a few months? I know a man who is going there next week; he is not a first-rate artist, but that you won’t mind; he is a very good fellow, and would put you in the way of things at the first, if you liked to travel with him. You have still the best part of the season before you, and you would be sure to find friends there.”

“Thank you,” said Humphrey, “you are very good, only—”

“As to present expenses, and so on,” Mr. Fleming continued, “that is my affair, and you need not say a word about it. I shall only be doing you a service, I was not too proud to accept once from your father, and we can, if you like, settle accounts later on. I will look up this man the first thing to-morrow, and then we can arrange matters more in detail. If you think of anything you would like better, you can tell me. Now I am afraid I must go. I have an engagement.”

He began putting up his things as he spoke. Humphrey took up his hat, and prepared to go.

"You are going home?" said Mr. Fleming.

"Yes," he said.

"Well, I will come and see you to-morrow, and in the meantime promise me not to leave Paris or do anything rash. Promise me that, Humphrey."

"I promise," he answered. He turned to go, and Mr. Fleming accompanied him to the door.

"My boy," he said, "I am more sorry for all this trouble than I can tell you—I am indeed."

Humphrey could not speak. He wrung his master's hand in silence, and went away.

CHAPTER XXIV.

A Dawning of Hope.

HUMPHREY never felt further in his life from forgiving himself than when he walked home that night after his visit to Mr. Fleming. His master's kindness and forgiveness, whilst they filled his heart, had no power to lift the burden that lay there ; rather they made it ten-fold heavier. As he crossed the bridge, he stood again upon the spot where he had stood the night before, and looked down into the river. His promise to his master held him, and yet he looked. With shame, remorse, dishonor clinging to him, cut off from friends, from love, from all that had gone to make a sweet familiar life, what remained ? For one shuddering moment he gazed down that gulf of hopelessness, and then recoiled. Yes, he could still recoil, and better that than tempt the unknown darkness, where hopelessness might hold him fast, and dishonor cleave to him forever.

A note was given him as he went in ; a gentleman, *un joli blond*, the woman said, had brought it about half an hour before. Humphrey took it up stairs with him to read. It was from Sterling, asking the lad to spend that evening with him. Humphrey could not go, but he never forgot this prompt kindness fulfilling the few friendly words of the previous night. The sense that there still existed for him human friendship and human fellowship that he had neither slighted nor betrayed, was the first gleam of light that fell upon the darkness of that day.

He lighted his lamp and made up his fire, for that shivering moment on the bridge had left him with a long-

ing for warmth, for the contact of familiar things. But when a cheerful blaze was brightening through the room, he still shivered as he looked round him. With a keen sensitiveness to external objects, Humphrey had also that habit of associating with them thoughts and memories, that enables a man to weave for himself a home in the presence of the barest walls and scantiest furniture. He had grown fond of his large bare room under the sloping roof, where a crackling, simmering fire, a circling lamp, books and papers and easel had many a time, half unconsciously to himself, given him a soothing welcome in the midst of his troubles. But to-night everything looked strange with a strangeness that was like a haunting presence; for he had drifted into regions where the silent, peaceful speech of familiar things seems more alien than the babbling of unknown tongues. Nothing can be more oppressive than this sense of alienation, this serving of relationship between a man and his surroundings—as though wrapped in chill mists he should stand, feeling for outstretched hands he cannot find, straining to catch well-known words that for ever die upon the ear. For Humphrey it was a bewildering element of wretchedness added to the hard misery of that dreary hour.

He began to pace up and down the room. Why had Mr. Fleming demanded that promise of him? Why not have let him go at once, as he would have gone, to work his own way if needful, with daily labor through the world? Better a thousand times to be walking along snowy roads on this winter's night to any bourne known or unknown, beneath the stars, than to remain here alone face to face with his misery. Never to see her again—never And to know that her thoughts must follow him with scorn and reproach for a base deed that he had done. He threw open the window and stood leaning out that the keen sting of the frozen air might give him the relief of physical pain. Below him lay the snow-laden roofs stretching one after the other far into the distance—like piled-up mounds, he thought, crushing

beneath their cold weight the life and hopes and joy out of a million beating hearts. With a shudder he closed the window and went back into the room. He sat down at the table, and dropping his head on his folded arms ceased the struggle with this nameless misery. There was no gleam of light then ; only a thicker darkness settling down.

A knock at the door startled him. He instinctively sprang up, shouting, "Entrez," but he had not made two steps towards the door when it was opened from the outside. "May I come in, Humphrey?" said the clear voice he had thought but now never to hear again, and, without waiting for an answer, Ersilia quietly closed the door behind her and came towards him. Humphrey, dazed and bewildered, stood for a moment motionless with his hand on the back of his chair, and in that moment the darkness faded, and in its stead there came, I know not how, a memory of his childhood—of how, as a little fellow, he being naughty one day had, still naughty, sobbed himself to sleep at night, how waking presently in the darkness he had sobbed again for fright and sorrow, till his mother coming in with a candle in her hand, and as it seemed to the half-scared child, a heavenly light upon her face, had forgiven him and comforted him to sleep again. Something, he thought, of that remembered light was on Ersilia's face now as she came up to him with tenderness and pity in her eyes, a sweet presence of loving womanhood that seemed to fill the room. He turned from her, sinking into his chair again with a deep irrepressible sob.

She sat down beside him at the table.

"Mr. Fleming told me you were unhappy, Humphrey," she said, in tones that were a little tremulous, "I thought I would come and see if I could help you."

"He told you the cause?" said Humphrey, lifting his head for an instant.

"Yes, he told me, and I thought what you would like best, would be to hear from myself that the letter never gave me a moment of uneasiness. I hardly read it ; I

have already almost forgotten its contents. I *could* not attach any importance to it, you know."

"That makes no difference in what I did," said the lad; "it does not prevent my feeling myself the guiltiest, the most miserable wretch on earth."

"I know," she said; "I know. I have often thought that to do a wrong action that is at variance with all the traditions of our past lives must seem worst of all, that we must feel it more deeply than any other." She paused a moment; Humphrey did not move. "But I don't think others feel it so," she went on in her clear tones; "we know that what we love best in our friends could never have done the evil thing; and that is why I could never associate this with you, Humphrey. In all my memories of you it could never hold a place, for I know that you have nothing in common with such a deed, however you came to commit it this once."

"God bless you for saying so!" he answered. There was a minute's silence, and then he spoke again in broken tones. "You must not think better of me than I deserve," he said; "you don't know, I could not tell you all . . . for months past I have been mad, I think; if I had not, this could never have been . . . it has been all darkness—you could not understand . . . as though all light, and hope, and aim had gone out of my life, and left it worthless and empty."

She did not answer at once, but Humphrey saw her face change and flush, and her hand, resting on the table, trembled.

"I do know," she said at last, with an effort; "I will not pretend not to understand, but—I do not know how to say it to you, Humphrey—do not think that in the midst of my own great happiness this winter I have had no pain, no self-reproach in thinking of you. That I had done you an intentional wrong you would never think, I know; but—" her lips trembled, she tried in vain to steady her voice, "I never thought to give anyone the pain I have given you," she said, "and if—if through me your life were marred, if the unhappiness I have caused

you were to lead you—to lead you—if you do wrong to yourself, because, however blindly, I have done wrong to you, it will be like a reproach laid upon my soul for ever.”

Humphrey started up. She was further above him than ever in her noble self-reproach, but something in the womanly weakness that caused her emotion touched a new chord. He took two or three turns up and down the room, and in that brief moment the old, mad, boyish passion died away with great anguish, and in its place a new and nobler love arose. He came back and stood by the table where she was sitting.

“That reproach shall never be laid on you,” he said, in a voice steady indeed, but in which, in spite of his efforts, the pain made itself felt; “it has never been your doing; it has been my own madness, jealousy, folly from the beginning—but that is over now. I swear that, with God’s help, I will never cause you sorrow or trouble again. Only leave me the hope that, after all that has passed, you will still care a little for me and for my work.”

“How can I not care for you?” she answered; “there is no one for whom I can have just the same feeling that I have for you. Though we only met once when we were children, you seem to me a part of my childhood, for, like myself, you lived as a child in my old home, and all the sights and sounds that make a sort of rhythm in my memory, and that I must always love better than any others, are part of your life also. To share the same childish memories must always make a strong tie, I think—like that between sister and brother.”

She had risen from her seat, and was standing looking at him with eyes full of affectionate pleading, but Humphrey could not answer; he could not respond to her words—not then. Only a little later, and it became the one happiness of his life that she could so regard him.

“And so with your work,” she went on, “for there also, Humphrey, you seem to me to belong to the beginning of things. For when I came to know you last summer, I began to understand more clearly than I had ever done before how it is that great works such as I had

learned to love are accomplished ; how a man may give up pleasure and luxury and self-seeking, to pursue a high ideal through life. And if," she said flushing, and with a noble and tender dignity, "if every day since then I have been more fully learning that lesson of pure devotion to great aims, so that my own life seems ennobled because I can sympathise with one so much nobler, you will not grudge me that happiness, Humphrey ; nor can I forget that it was your enthusiasm which first taught me that possibilities I had dreamt of might be, not dreams but realities."

"You have thought too well of me," he answered, very much moved, "I had—I hope I still have a high ideal ; but I have forgotten it lately."

"But you will not any more," she said, earnestly ; "for that is what I wanted to say—it always seems to me so sad when noble purposes and single-minded aims like yours fade and die away. People's lives change, and they seem to have no power to hold to their first and purer thought. They weary of their work, or they begin to care for money, and success, and pleasant things. I should be sorry to see you do that, Humphrey ; I would have you scorn everything but the highest—like your master."

Her voice sank as she finished speaking, but her words kindled a sudden enthusiasm in the lad's heart. Thoughts, aims, aspirations that had long been dormant, awoke again. "I will," he said, looking up, "I vow solemnly that I will. I will prove myself not unworthy of you—and of him." There was a mist before his eyes, and he could see nothing clearly ; but he felt her hand held out, and his own meeting it in a firm clasp. It was one of those rare moments of human consecration when, through some pure channel, the Divine will seems to touch the heart. Those are blessed to whom one such moment is given in life.

Neither of them spoke for a minute. "I must go," Ersilia said then. She began wrapping her shawl more closely round her, and Humphrey noticed, for the first time, that she was in evening dress.

"The carriage went on with Aunt Mathilde," she said; "but it will have returned by this time, and she will be expecting me."

He went with her to the door, but as his hand was on the lock she paused again. "You are going away, Humphrey, are you not?" she said.

"Yes, very shortly—to Rome, I believe."

Some words were trembling on her lips, but she checked herself.

"I shall see you again before you go?" was all she said.

"Yes," he answered; "I will come and wish you good-bye."

He opened the door; Mr. Fleming was waiting outside. He had come with Ersilia up the dark and public staircase, and was walking up and down now till she should be ready. To Humphrey it seemed the last touch to all the generous and patient kindness that had gone before.

He stood and watched them going down the stairs together. Once Ersilia turned and looked back at him with a sweet, troubled smile in her eyes, that still pierces him to the heart as he remembers it, for he never saw that look on her face again. "Be brave, be patient," it seemed to him to say, "God has given me this infinite happiness, but not the less do I suffer in your sufferings." He watched them till a turn of the staircase hid them from sight, and then he went back and sat down by his fire again. Repentance, hope, resolution, keen pain were struggling within him, but over all there was peace. Her presence seemed still to linger in the room like a benediction.

Three days afterwards, as Humphrey was packing up some painting things in preparation for his start for Rome the following night, a note was brought to him. He knew the hand-writing, and opened it hastily. There were only a few words.

"Dear Humphrey" (it ran), "can you come to me this afternoon? We are in much trouble.

"ERSILIA."

In two minutes he was out of the house, hurrying along the streets with I know not what foreboding heavy at his heart.

CHAPTER XXV.

Last moments.

THE first person Humphrey saw was Mademoiselle Mathilde. She was, perhaps, on the look-out for him, for she met him in the entry and drew him at once into the dining-room.

"Well," she said, "have you heard—have you heard? Would not one say that the last day was come, and the sky about to fall, when people who have been safely dead and buried for a year and more come to life again."

"For Heaven's sake, Mademoiselle, explain yourself," said Humphrey; "I have heard nothing."

"You have not heard that this wretch, this miserable, this good-for-nothing, who calls himself Prince Zaraikine, is not dead at all—"

"Not dead?" said Humphrey.

"Nor been dead, so far as I can make out," said Mademoiselle Mathilde; "can write a letter as well as you or I, and is in Paris at this moment—or was this morning."

"Good God!" said Humphrey. He could not utter another word at first; he walked up and down the room, unable to realize the stupendous blow that had fallen. "But when—how," he said at last, stopping in front of Mademoiselle Mathilde.

"Oh, it is nothing new," she said, "his being alive, I mean. That little chit, Charlotte Grey, has known him for a long time; not as the Prince of course, but by some other name—Rouselle, Rossel—"

"No!" cried Humphrey, "not M. Rossel; don't

tell me that, Mademoiselle, don't tell me that—" He leaned back against the wall, giddy for the moment, as though all his life was changing and shifting into strange and horrible combinations. Mademoiselle Mathilde was fairly frightened at the effect of her words.

"Good Heavens, Mr. Humphrey! what is the matter? What have I said? Take a glass of water." She was hastening to the sideboard to get one, but Humphrey recovered himself and stopped her.

"There must be some mistake," he said; "I know M. Rossel, I know him very well; he lives in the same house that I do, and I have seen a great deal of him. It cannot be as you say. He knew Prince Zaraikine—he told me so. He saw him drowned—" But even whilst he spoke, conviction was forcing itself upon him; M. Rossel's own words, his interest in the Princess Zaraikine, that letter whose motive he had never cared to seek—

"What does it matter what he said?" answered Mademoiselle Mathilde; "he could not tell the truth if he tried, unless he said a falsehood backwards by mistake. I saw him myself this morning. He is altered, certainly; his hair has turned white, and he wears a beard. If I had passed him in the street, thinking he was dead, I should not have supposed he had come to life again. But there is no mistaking him. I knew his face as well as I knew my brother-in-law's."

By degrees Humphrey learnt all that Mademoiselle Mathilde had to tell. It was that little Charlotte Grey, she said, with as much indignation as if the poor child had been responsible for all that had happened, or as if, alas! that the truth should be known, were not the only thing to be desired. Charlotte had been staying with the Princess Zaraikine it appeared; her aunt and cousin had gone into the country for a few days, and she had come to stop from Friday till Monday—had gone home, in fact, only this morning. On the previous night, Ersilia had sat up late reading and writing, and happening to go to her window long after midnight had been surprised to see a light still burning in Charlotte's room, of which

the window looking on to the courtyard, was at right angles with her own. Fearing that the girl might be ill, she made her way softly round, and, being admitted, had found a pitiful state of things indeed; Charlotte not in bed, not undressed even, but sitting on the floor crying her eyes out with a crumpled letter in her hand. At first she would answer none of Ersilia's anxious inquiries—he had told her never to mention him again to the Princess Zaraikine, he would be very angry if she did, so angry that she would never see nor hear from him any more—not that that would make any difference now—he was going away—he was going away—his letter to tell her so had been brought to her from home that very evening. As she spoke with redoubled sobs, the letter dropped from her hand; Ersilia picked it up. M. Rossel's writing was peculiar, and, as he had once said, difficult to disguise; I do not know that the attempt had been made in this instance; at any rate, as Ersilia's eyes fell upon it she recognized her husband's handwriting.

She made Charlotte tell her everything—all details that one by one must have destroyed each faint hope as it arose, and then, as Charlotte herself has told me, sat for a long time silent, holding the girl in her arms. When the poor child, in her childish trouble, broke into sobs and tears again, she soothed her with such tender words as she could find, and presently persuading her to undress, sat by her till she fell asleep. Then she went back to her own room. What passed in the hours that followed, who shall say? When Roberts came in as usual at half-past seven the next morning, she found her mistress's bed unslept in, and herself writing by candlelight in the chill January dawn.

"Roberts," she said, preventing all inquiries, "I want Jean to take this letter to the Rue de Seine by nine o'clock, and to wait for an answer. If you will light my fire and leave me, I will lie down till he returns."

Ersilia's letter to her husband, Humphrey never saw, but Prince Zaraikine's answer afterwards came into his possession.

"Madame," he wrote, "your penetration has not deceived you. The report of my death was a false one, though circumstances obliged me for a time to leave it uncontradicted. Believe me, I appreciate the devotion you show in offering to share my misfortunes, and respect my secret. Fortunately, I need make no such demands upon your generosity. Letters that I received only this morning confirm a hope I have for some time entertained, and I find that I am at liberty to resume my name without fear of ulterior and unpleasant consequences. Under these circumstances I should, in any case, have done myself the honor of communicating with you before long. I am obliged immediately to leave Paris ; but I hope soon to have the pleasure of a personal interview.

"Accept, Madame, the expression, etc.

"PRINCE ZARAIKINE."

What had brought about this change in M. Rossel's fortunes? It was only later that Humphrey heard this part of the story, and then perhaps not the whole of it. How Prince Zarakine had finally escaped drowning, he never learned ; that he had been nearly drowned and his health injured for life by the *mauvais quart d'heure* he had spent in the half-frozen river is certain. For the rest, the facts were very simple. The officer he had shot had not been killed, as he supposed. He had lingered between life and death for some months, and finally recovered ; but so completely had Prince Zarakine disappeared from the world that had known him, that it was again months before a rumor of this fact reached him, and many weeks before, with all the precautions he was obliged to take, he could get the rumor confirmed. In the mean time, death which had spared the young Russian officer, had been busy elsewhere. The Polish Countess had died soon after the son to whom she had sacrificed her lover, and remorse perhaps had led her to make certain statements which, when laid before the Russian Government, had, to some extent,

modified their views of Prince Zaraikine's case. Had the Prince been alive, he would have been free, not indeed to return to Russia, but to pursue his fortune unmolested through all the world beside. The Prince was alive. The one friend to whom he had ventured to confide the fact of his existence, hastened to communicate to him these welcome tidings, and he reappeared.

It was a simple story of tardy and imperfect redress given to a man whose Nemesis as not unfrequently happens in this world, had come, not as swift-handed Justice, but in the shape of a cruel wrong done to him by another.

It was not until after Ersilia had received her husband's letter that Mademoiselle Mathilde heard anything of what had happened, and then, with the prompt decision and good feeling she could show in emergencies, she started off at once to see Prince Zaraikine. The interview, as Humphrey gathered, was a very short one. The Prince, who was making preparations for his journey, intimated with great politeness his desire that Mademoiselle Mathilde's visit should not be prolonged beyond a few minutes, and with anger, dismay, and sorrow in her heart, she came back to Ersilia.

When all was certain, when no lingering doubt could remain, Ersilia sent to Mr. Fleming. "He came at once," said Mademoiselle Mathildé. "They were together twenty minutes, half-an-hour, an hour—I do not know how long. I did not see him. As soon as he was gone, Ersilia shut herself up in her room, and never stirred for two hours. She has wished him good-bye—it is as if we were all dead or dying. And for that matter, though I have no wish to die more than another, I see very little use in living in a world like this. Everything has happened at the most unlucky time too; it is always so, I have noticed it again and again. People always die when it is most inconvenient to go into mourning, and here we are in the middle of the season, when Ersilia was beginning to enjoy herself a little for the first time in her life, and I myself, after years of priva-

tion—well, it is all over now, and it is of no use to think about it; but I shall never forget that little Charlotte, never.”

“It was not her fault, poor child,” said Humphrey, sighing. He had no thoughts to give to Charlotte and her troubles then, but, in any case, he was in no fear of her breaking her heart permanently over her childish affection for a man who had been kind to her, but who was nearly three times her age. “Is Mrs. Sidney still in Paris?” he inquired.

“No, she left this very morning by the early train. I wanted to send after her; I thought she might be some comfort to Ersilia, but she would not hear of it, poor dear child. You know what Ersilia is, Mr. Humphrey, when she has made up her mind to a thing, she will go through with it, happen what may. And Heaven only knows what may not happen now that this good-for-nothing, this poltroon, this villain without honor—I wish I were a man,” said Mademoiselle Mathilde, suddenly blazing up, “that I might call him names bad enough—now that he has come back. He spent all her money before, and he may spend it again for anything I know. My brother-in-law, who was a perfect fool about money matters, made I don’t know what idiotic arrangements at her marriage. Well, there is no use in thinking about it; what is coming will come. You had better go and see her, Mr. Humphrey; she has something to say to you; I don’t know what. You will find her in the library.”

Humphrey, with a beating heart, made his way through the drawing-room into the library. Ersilia was seated at the open bureau, writing, but she looked round as the door opened, and came forward at once to meet him. Her eyes were red, her cheeks colorless. She could not smile.

“It is good of you to come, Humphrey,” she said; “have you seen Aunt Mathilde? Have you heard what has happened?”

“Yes, I have heard,” he answered.

"That is well—then we need speak no further of it now. I sent for you, Humphrey, to ask you to put off your journey to Rome. Mr. Fleming will be alone, and—it is hard for him."

"I will stay," said Humphrey.

"Thank you, I felt sure you would. I go to La Chênaie to-morrow, as was already arranged. I do not know when I may be in Paris again. Aunt Mathilde is very good; she gives up all her engagements to accompany me."

The door opened again, and Roberts came in with her mistress's out-door things.

"You will forgive my leaving you, Humphrey," she said, "I must see my lawyer this afternoon, and it is already late."

"You had better by far let me come with you, Madam," said Roberts, as she helped her to put on her cloak, "you don't look fit to be going about alone."

"Dear Roberts," she answered, "I would rather be alone. I may be detained some time. I shall do very well."

"Are you sure?" said Humphrey, "can I not help you in any way? Or shall I go now to Mr. Fleming?"

She shook all over at the sudden mention of his name, but controlled herself with an effort.

"I do not know that you will find him at home," she said with difficulty, "but thank you, Humphrey—yes, it might be well for you to go."

No more was said. What words of his could avail anything? He went down stairs with her, and saw her into the carriage, and then, without re-entering the house set off for the Rue de Clichy.

Mr. Fleming was not at home. The studio looked deserted. The fire was out; his palette with its sheaf of brushes was lying on the painting table as though he had laid it down in haste when he was called away. A sudden chill struck through Humphrey. How had the shock affected Mr. Fleming? With a temperament so sensitive that he was wont to feel each change in the moral and

physical atmosphere around him, as the eye feels each subtle change of light, how had he been affected by such a shock as this? Humphrey both longed and dreaded to see him, but he could not wait then on the chance of his coming in, perhaps not for hours. There was more than one thing he must do before night. He must see the man with whom he was to have travelled on the morrow; he must re-engage his room. He would return, he thought, as quickly as he could.

It was getting dusk by the time he reached the Rue de Seine. The door of the room opposite his own was wide open; the porter's wife was there piling up furniture, opening windows, shaking rugs. M. Rossel was really gone then. Humphrey had never seen him since that morning when he had left him in anger and contempt, and he stood still for a moment now, looking in at the familiar room, with a hundred stinging memories crowding upon him. How was it he had been so blind, so unsuspecting as never to divine the significance of questions, and words, and circumstances that returned to his mind now charged with meaning? And yet he could not altogether wonder at his own stupidity. We are so accustomed to take the death of our fellow-creatures upon trust, that it would be difficult in any case to shake our belief, without strong reason given, in what is held to be a trustworthy report, and Humphrey had no *a priori* grounds for suspicion. It was, perhaps, more surprising that the truth had not come out long before in some other way; the chance by which an at any rate inevitable disclosure had been anticipated by a few hours only, might have happened any time in the last six months. Had Prince Zaraikine ever really joined a conspiracy, he would, I think, have been the despair of his fellow conspirators; for, though sometimes a suspicious, he can never have been a wisely cautious man; otherwise he would have escaped some troubles that he fell into through life. In fact, though placed in exceptional circumstances, he was, I suspect, very much like a good many other people—he took life as it came and followed

his impulses with a keen eye to immediate results, and not without a certain amount of precaution induced by his peculiar position, but with no very deep prevision of ultimate consequences. He would risk a great deal to gain but little, yet hesitate to risk a little to gain a great deal. So at least it seemed to Randolph afterwards, in thinking over such circumstances as came to his knowledge in the life of a man whom, from first to last, he knew but imperfectly.

It was but a minute he could give now to these reflections. The porter's wife nodded to him as she saw him standing there. M. Rossel had been gone about two hours, she said; he had left orders for his letters to be forwarded to Brussels. And to-morrow night Monsieur would be gone also? No, Monsieur had changed his mind; he might probably stay on for some time.

He went into his own room, which he had left, how many hours ago? The calamity had been so swift and sudden, the whole attitude of his thoughts was so completely altered, that although it seemed to himself that he had known of it all from the beginning, he could hardly realize it even now. He looked around him with changed eyes. Here also everything was desolate and in confusion, his portmanteau half-filled, his books and portfolios heaped together. He would not stay to set anything in order then; he was only in haste to return to the studio.

He was obliged to go out of his way to call at a shop, and countermand an order. He had executed his commission, and was walking rapidly along a lighted, rattling street, when his attention was caught by a carriage standing at a church door; he thought that he recognized the coachman and turned back again after he had passed, to satisfy himself. Yes, he was not mistaken, it was the Princess Zaraikine's carriage. Was Ersilia within the church then? He had hardly asked himself the question, when the door swung back, and a bent old woman with a shaking head came out. As in her slow movements she held the door open, Humphrey had a glimpse into the

vast interior, with its dim altar-light and flickering constellations of tapers, and the next moment Ersilia herself appeared. She looked paler than before, he thought; there were sharp lines of suffering on her forehead, her lips were compressed as with resolute pain. Was it peace she had come to seek here, away from all the familiar surroundings whose sympathy she had, as it were, claimed in the happiest moments her life had known? It is not peace that we find in hours of sharpest pain, only the strength to wrestle with an ever-deepening sense of anguish until peace is won.

Humphrey held back the swinging door that she might pass out. She showed no surprise at seeing him there, only stood for a moment as though to collect her thoughts.

"I had something to say to you, Humphrey," she said, "will you come home with me?" As he laid his hand on the carriage door, "Let us walk," she said, "it is not far."

It was a clear, frosty evening, with stars shining in a dark sky above the lights, and the people, and the snowy roofs. They walked on quickly and silently; Ersilia did not speak, and to Humphrey all past and future seemed merged for the moment in an intense present. As they turned the corner of the last street, some one joined them. It was Mr. Fleming.

"I saw you go out," he said, in a voice that Humphrey would not have known to be his; "I have been watching for your return."

She did not answer, but a flush passed over her face, leaving it whiter than before, and her hand resting on Humphrey's arm trembled. In two minutes they were at the house; the *porte cochère* opened, and they all three went in together. A lamp hanging overhead illuminated the dark, roughly paved entry; on one side a cheerful gleam came from the red-curtained glass door of the concierge's lodge. Ersilia took her hand from Humphrey's arm as they entered, and with Mr. Fleming at her side went on to the foot of the staircase. Then she paused.

"We must part here," she said, in a low and clear voice, as though emotion were exhausted, and volition alone remained.

"I shall see you to-morrow," he answered.

"No," she said, "we leave early in the morning."

There was a minute's silence before he spoke again.

"I cannot leave you so," he said, hoarsely, "I shall come to you at La Chênaie."

"You will not do that!" she said in a changed voice, and raising her eyes to his for the first time; "you promised me you would not."

He did not answer. He took her hands in his, and for a long moment they were both motionless—a moment that seemed measured by the quivering pain in Ersilia's face, as she stood with dilating eyes and parted lips. All at once her face changed; she grew very white, and loosened her hands gently. He held them a moment longer, then letting them drop, "I cannot, God help me, I cannot bear it," he said, leaning back against the wall and covering his face with his hands.

She stood still for a moment as he had left her, then pressing her hands together as with irrepressible anguish, she gathered up her dress and began to ascend the stairs. Humphrey, who had lingered irresolute, approached, but she only shook her head, and pointing with a mute gesture to Mr. Fleming passed on. In a minute Mr. Fleming, too, roused himself, and moved toward the door. He never saw Humphrey, he never looked back; the *porte cochère* closed behind him with a bang that echoed through the silent courtyard, and then Humphrey following, saw him walking slowly homewards, with a head bowed as though twenty years had passed over it that day.

CHAPTER XXVI.

Mrs. Grey pays a Visit.

It would not be easy to give any definite account of the weeks that followed. How Mr. Fleming lived through them, I hardly know; something of energy, perhaps, aroused by the very weight of the blow came to sustain him—as a man will put forth his whole strength to gain breathing space beneath the heavy fallen stone that would otherwise crush the life out of him. And yet it was hardly energy, rather a dream or stupor in which he lived apart, and with which his actions were only half-associated. After the first day, he began to paint again, sometimes remaining at his easel for hours together; but his pictures made little progress, and at other times he would sit almost the whole day in unbroken silence before the fire. He had given up his journey to Florence; he could not leave Paris then, he told Humphrey briefly, without further comment. He saw almost no one; now and then an old friend came in, or some one was admitted on indispensable business; but for the most part, the door was closed against all comers, and a world-forsaken silence, as it were, reigned in the studio. Humphrey alone hardly ever left him, even sleeping at the house after a time, old Marguerite, the cook, who was heart-broken at the course affairs had taken, turning out of her room on his behalf. At first the lad was doubtful whether his presence were a relief or an oppression to his master, until one afternoon, being detained at a picture-dealer's, he was absent for some hours. On his return, he came in quietly, as usual; but in a moment Mr. Fleming came

up to him. "Where have you been, Humphrey?" he said. "I thought you were never coming back."

Humphrey told him, and also what had detained him.

"I missed you," he answered. "You are necessary to me, my boy. Do not leave me for longer than you can help."

No news, no word reached them from Ersilia. Sometimes Humphrey thought of writing himself to La Chênaie, then hesitating, not daring to speak of it to Mr. Fleming, put it off from day to day. But this sense of silence, of separation, weighed upon him with a dreariness that cannot be told. As he and Mr. Fleming worked together in the studio, sometimes hardly exchanging two words in the course of the day, the sounds from the outer world would strike with a sudden harshness and incongruity on the ear, as though penetrating some lonely tomb. Every day they went together at the same hour to dine at the nearest restaurant, then returning, the evening was spent as the day had been, till, retiring for the night, Humphrey would hear his master pacing up and down his room till the early hours of the morning.

On the rare occasions that Mr. Fleming broke silence by more than a few words, it was to question Humphrey about M. Rossel. "I wish I had seen him—I wish I had seen him," he would say, in a troubled voice, as though perplexed by some inward vision; "describe him to me, Humphrey." So persistent was his strange hankering on this point that the lad one day tried to draw M. Rossel's face from memory; but the result was not very successful. Mr. Fleming, who was walking up and down the room, paused as Humphrey laid the drawing down. "Is it like?" he said. "Don't show it to me if it is not. It will only confuse me more."

This sort of life, in which time seemed measured, not by hours and minutes, but by pulsations of feeling, appears, on looking back, to have lasted for many weeks; but in reality it can have been hardly a month before a change came. It began with a ring at the door-bell one

day late in February, followed by a voice that Humphrey at once recognized inquiring for Mr. Fleming. Old Marguerite happened to be out, and the little girl who occasionally helped her had received no instructions about visitors.

"It is Mrs. Grey," said Humphrey. "You don't want to see her, sir, do you? I will tell Jeanne not to admit her."

"Mrs. Grey?" said Mr. Fleming, vaguely, "that woman? She must come in, if she is there, Humphrey; it makes no difference." Indeed, it was too late to interfere, for the door had opened, and Mrs. Grey, sweeping and gracious, was already in the room. Mr. Fleming looked up and shook hands with her, then went on with his painting, leaving the task of entertaining her to Humphrey.

"It is very good of you to admit me so early," she said, "but the days are still so short, and I was afraid I might not find you at home. It is so long, so very long since I was at your studio—not since last November, I think—and I have heard so much of Mr. Fleming's pictures lately. I was at M. G——'s atelier only yesterday—have you seen his pictures, Mr. Randolph? He has some charming little *genre* things, but nothing to be compared to these—nothing—'if you want to see some really fine pictures, Madame,' he said, 'you should go to my friend Fleming's studio; they are worth looking at.' And so they are, indeed—what coloring, what a delicious sentiment—might I trouble you for a chair, Mr. Randolph? I could sit and look at these for hours."

He gave her a chair, and sitting down, she carefully levelled her eye-glass at the painting before her, and let her eyes freely roam about the room. To see Mrs. Grey, all unchanged, in the midst of a world otherwise so changed, affected Humphrey with a grim sense of the irony of things. In half a minute she was up again, and carrying her chair with her, had dropped down in front of another picture.

"This is yours, Mr. Randolph?" she said. "From

Dante? I do not remember the passage—in fact, though I am almost ashamed to own it, I never read Dante. I have a very beautiful copy given me by an Italian friend, but somehow I have never been able to devote the necessary time to studying it. I look forward to reading it later on with Rose. Beautiful—most beautiful, Mr. Randolph; there is something so exceedingly touching and sweet—and—and—touching in the girl's face, it quite appeals to one; surely, it is a little like—ah, that reminds me, Mr. Randolph; may I not see that charming portrait of the Princess Zaraikine that Mr. Fleming was at work on last November? It promised so exceedingly well."

"It is not finished," said Humphrey. "How is Miss Grey?"

"Charlotte, do you mean? Oh, she is very well, thank you. She wanted to come with me to-day, but I knew," lowering her voice, "that Mr. Fleming is—that he would, perhaps, not care to see many visitors at present."

"I think Miss Grey would have been very welcome," answered Humphrey. "If you will let me turn this a little more to the light, Mrs. Grey, I think you will see it better."

"Thank you, it does perfectly—perfectly. But may I really not see that portrait, Mr. Randolph? I am so much interested in that poor young thing, you know—though people do say now that there have always been some very strange stories about her, that she ran away from her husband when she was quite a young girl, and that the blame is not all on one side. One never knows."

They were at the further end of the studio, and she still spoke in a lowered voice, glancing toward Mr. Fleming the while; he gave no sign, but Humphrey nevertheless felt certain that he heard every word.

"The Princess Zaraikine is my cousin, as you are aware," Humphrey said in answer. "I believe that I am accurately informed as to the circumstances of her married life, and you have my authority for contradicting every word that casts the slightest shadow of blame upon her."

"Indeed—well, no doubt you are well informed, Mr. Randolph ; and I am far from exonerating Prince Zarai-kine ; I have always understood that he bears the worst of characters. Still one never quite knows what to believe, and there is never smoke without some fire."

"There would be neither smoke nor fire, Madam," said Mr. Fleming, speaking for the first time, and coming forward, "but for a certain order of minds which lies below the level of my understanding, and whose delight is in inventing and retailing the basest lies. For myself, I always give those who retail them the credit of inventing them."

"Mr. Fleming, you surprise me," said Mrs. Grey, rising with some dignity, "this is language that I am *not* accustomed to. Nor do I know what you mean by lies—I know them to be truths, and I shall not hesitate to say so whenever the occasion offers." She bowed, and swept out of the room without another word. Mr. Fleming locked the door after her. I had never seen him in such a storm of anger.

"Can no one stop her? Can no one denounce her?" he said, walking up and down the room with his head between his hands. "Is nothing sacred to her? Nothing safe from her cursed lying tongue? How dare she utter a name she is not worthy even to hear pronounced? My God, my God, that it should all have come to this—"

"She knows nothing of it," Humphrey said at last ; "it does not hurt her."

"No"—he said more quietly, "she knows nothing of it." He went up to her portrait, which was leaning against the wall, and, turning it round, gazed at it with an inexpressible mournfulness. "Is it fate, Humphrey?" he said at last, "is it fate? Why must she suffer and I not help her? She needs me, as I need her, and yet Heaven and earth are not wider apart than we are with that man and her will standing between us."

He went back to his easel without waiting for an answer, but the conversation had roused him ; he could not settle to his work again. Presently he left it and began

walking up and down the room with frequent pauses ; at last, for the first time in all these weeks, he proposed that they should go out.

They made their way down to the Tuileries gardens. It was a mild day, the February sun shone brightly, and presently, seated under one of the trees, Humphrey saw Charlotte Grey. He had not met her since the night of Mrs. Grey's party ; she looked older, he thought, and very pale and thin, poor child. She happened to be alone just then, for her aunt was standing at some little distance talking to one of her thousand acquaintances, and she no sooner caught sight of Mr. Fleming and Humphrey advancing along the wide avenue than she jumped up and came to meet them.

"I am so glad to see you again, Mr. Randolph," she said. "I thought you had forgotten us." Then with a shy glance she turned to greet Mr. Fleming also. I think that he hardly knew her for a moment, then all at once he remembered who she was, and Ersilia's friendship for her.

"I have not seen you for a long time, Miss Grey," he said, shaking hands with her kindly. "You are well, I hope ?"

The girl did not answer. She stood glancing from one to the other with her dark soft eyes ; her forlorn looks seemed to reproach Humphrey, who had hardly thought of her lately. What a tragedy it was, he could not help thinking now, that had written these lines on three sad faces looking hopelessly at each other, whilst one, never absent from their thoughts, suffered in loneliness far away. It was like meeting in some open grave, in which the dead-alive should still have hearts to throb and nerves to quiver. So they stood for a moment ; then Rose came running up, and Charlotte starting, looked around for her aunt.

"I must go," she said ; then drawing Humphrey a little on one side, "have you heard anything of the Princess Zairaikine ?" she said. "I had a letter from her this morning. Would you like to read it ? I have it here."

She put the letter into his hand as she spoke. "Do come and see us soon, Mr. Randolph," she said, looking at him wistfully ; "it is so dull at home."

She ran off as her aunt approached, and Humphrey rejoined Mr. Fleming, who had turned and was walking towards the château. He had not noticed Charlotte as she gave the letter—indeed he noticed nothing—nor would Humphrey mention it till they were at home again. Then he told him. His countenance changed ; his hand shook as he held it out.

"Give it to me," he said, in a hoarse voice. A flush passed over his pale face as he saw her handwriting ; he took the letter to the window, and stood there for a long time motionless. At last, without turning round, he held the paper out that Humphrey might take it and read it also. It was getting dusk, and the lad came and stood by his master at the window to see the words.

There was not much to read. The letter was apparently an answer to one that Charlotte had written in the midst of her own troubles, and the tone of it was brave, almost cheerful, with kind words of encouragement and sympathy for the girl. About herself there was almost nothing ; perhaps it was for this reason, that between each line we seemed to read other words that told of loneliness and suffering. Mr. Fleming took the paper again when Humphrey had finished, and stood gazing at it a minute longer, his hand shading his eyes.

"She is ill," he said, speaking the thought that was in the mind of both ; "that is not her usual handwriting. Humphrey, I must go to her, she is suffering—Why should she suffer, my God, why should she suffer ? And there is no end to it—if there were any end to it—God help us both !"

He flung himself into a chair, and for the first time in Humphrey's presence gave way to a burst of grief terrible to witness—such grief as the lad in his inexperience had hardly imagined—the hard, hopeless grief that seems to drain the very sources of life, yet leaves everything unchanged.

After a long time he became calmer. Late in the evening, after hours of unbroken silence, he spoke again.

"This can be endured no longer," he said; "what the end will be, God only knows—but something must be done. I cannot go to her myself—not yet—you must go, Humphrey."

"I?" said Humphrey, startled.

"Yes; why not?" he said. "You do not mind, my boy?" some vague memory returning.

"Mind!" answered Humphrey. Indeed it seemed to him all at once that with this course open, present endurance had in fact reached its limits. "I mind nothing but leaving you, sir," he said.

"That is no matter," Mr. Fleming answered. He began walking up and down the room again, with bent head, and a pause at each turn. "You might go to-morrow," he said, "the less delay the better; you will see if she—she will be glad to see you. There is a train leaves Paris about eleven; that will suit you the best. You will get to La Chênaie about three, and you had better sleep there. The last train for Paris starts at five, which would leave you hardly sufficient time, as the house is three or four miles from the station."

"I will go, of course," said Humphrey. A sudden dazzling came between his eyes and the paper as he sat drawing at an easel, his hand shook, he found that he could not go on. He got up and began to put away his things for the night. Mr. Fleming was still wandering up and down with a restlessness that was new in him. Presently he came and stood by Humphrey, watching the lad's movements with absent eyes.

"When does Prince Zaraikine return to Paris?" he asked.

"I don't know, I have not heard," said Humphrey, wondering at the sudden question. "One might inquire in the Rue de Seine; they would know there perhaps."

"No—no matter," said Mr. Fleming. He resumed his restless pacing, but in a moment he spoke again as

though he could not help it. "I cannot see him," he said, "I wish I could see him—the man who has cursed her life—"

He broke off abruptly and left the studio, and Humphrey too, presently, went to his own room, which was next to Mr. Fleming's. The thought of the morrow filled his mind, and he could not sleep. All night he tossed and dozed and woke again, and at each waking some slight movement in the next room, the grating of a chair, a slow footstep, told him that there also was a sleepless watcher. He was in the studio earlier than usual the next morning; but Mr. Fleming was already there before him, walking up and down with the same subdued, restless excitement that Humphrey had noticed in his manner the evening before. His face was haggard, yet flushed, and his eyes looked worn and reddened from want of sleep; he had not been in bed that night.

Humphrey left the house soon after ten o'clock. His master, who had hardly spoken, except to give him one or two parting directions, bade him a silent farewell, accompanying him to the door. The lad heard it close behind him as he went down stairs—he himself was in a state of wrought-up excitement that morning, and when he had got into the street, he turned back with an impulse he could not resist, and went up stairs to the studio again. Mr. Fleming was sitting in front of the fire, his elbows on his knees, his head in his hands. He had often sat so before, but the thought that he might remain there now for hours with no one to speak to him, or to rouse him, struck Humphrey like a new pain. He could not bear to leave him so; he went up to him.

"What is it, my boy?" he said, disturbed, but not looking up.

"Won't you go out?" said Humphrey in a half-choked voice, not knowing what to say. "I can't bear to leave you like this."

"I shall do very well," he said; "don't mind me." Then as Humphrey did not move, "Go, my boy," he said, "you will be late for the train."

There was nothing in the words, and yet Humphrey lingered, and turned to look again as he reached the door. Mr. Fleming did not move, and with a dull disquietude in his heart the lad once more left the house.

CHAPTER XXVII.

At La Chênaie.

RANDOLPH reached C——, the nearest station to La Chênaie, between two and three o'clock that afternoon. It was a small white town or rather village, lying amongst low hills; a slow stream flowed through it, crossed by a single-arched bridge; close by stood a rattling paper mill, the sole sign of life and activity in the place. Humphrey sought in vain for any ready means of conveyance, and, growing impatient at last, he obtained the necessary directions and started on the five miles' walk to La Chênaie.

It was a mild, cloudy afternoon, with flying gleams of sunshine lighting up the wide country that stretched away for miles beneath the wide grey sky—a silent undulating land, with fields, meadows, leafless woods following the long, slow curves and slopes that sunk now and then to show a more distant range of dim blue hills beyond. The stream, marked by grassy banks and pollard willows, wandered here and there below the level of the road, and presently Humphrey came upon a water-mill set down in a hollow, and sheltered by trees. A dog barked as he approached, some children came running out of the house, a mild-eyed motherly woman stood in the doorway, the water splashed as the huge wheel boomed and turned—it was a pretty bit of life let into the midst of the still landscape, and Humphrey turned aside to ask the woman whether he was on the right road to the château.

"It was quite right," she said. "There was a short cut across the fields, but as Monsieur was a stranger, he

would do better to follow the high-road for about a mile further, and he would see the château before him. He could not mistake it, there was no other house in that direction."

"Madame—the Princess Zaraikine is at the château now," said Humphrey, hesitating over the question he longed to ask. "She is well?"

"Not well," said the woman; "but better, certainly better these last few days."

"Better! Good Heavens, she has been really ill, then!" said Humphrey. He had known it—he had known it ever since reading her letter to Charlotte; nay, he had known it all these weeks; in one brief moment he was living through long days of anxiety and suspense. "Since when has she been ill?" he said, trying to speak calmly.

"She has been here nearly a month," said the woman, considering. "It was the Saturday after she came that she was taken ill. Some say it was the fever that was so bad in the village last year, for Madame, who has a good heart, would have all the sick people who could be moved up to the château to nurse. But she did not take it then, and I, who used to go up there to help, was never the worse for it either. But it may be, for all that; for who knows what brings the illnesses in this world? My husband now, he says it is as the wind blows, and that fever comes with one and rheumatism with another. It may be so. Who knows?"

"But she is better," said Humphrey, with some impatience, "you say she is better?"

"Yes, Monsieur, she is much better, she goes out again now. I have not seen her myself, but my eldest son who works on the château farm goes every day to inquire. There were none but were sorry when she fell ill; every one about her loves her since she was so good at the time of the fever, though my husband does say she has all sorts of new notions, and wants to alter things that have been in his time and his father's before him. But she's young, Monsieur, that's what I say; she's

very young, and strange to the place, as it were. It seems only the other day that she was no bigger than my Marie, when she used to come and stop at the château for a few weeks in the summer."

"Madame la Princess is a saint out of heaven," said one of the children, in her shrill little voice—a small, round thing of seven or eight, who, with her finger in her mouth, had not ceased staring with wide blue eyes since Humphrey came up.

"Hark to Jeanne," said the mother, stooping down to pull the child's finger away and give an indiscriminate rub to her rosy face. "She is always there with her silly tale. She fell asleep, Monsieur, in the church one evening, and Madame found her there crying in the dark, and brought her back to the end of the path here, where she could see the light shining and run home by herself. I thought she was lost, the little fool, and had been out a dozen times to look for her, when all at once she comes running in, 'Oh, mother,' she says, 'the Holy Virgin, or a saint out of heaven came to me in the church, and vanished at the top of the hill there.' I thought at first there might be something in it, for such things do sometimes happen, and why not to Jeanne as well as to another? But it was all nonsense; Madame herself called the next day to see me and told me all about it; but Jeanne, who has never too many wits about her, has had it all mixed in her head ever since. And for that matter, Madame has a face lovely enough to have come straight from heaven, although she looks so ill."

"She was not ill then?" said Humphrey, keenly touched and interested. After the long silent pain of the last few weeks, this fresh, unconscious talk was welcome as the free twittering of birds to an escaped prisoner.

"Not to call ill, Monsieur," said the woman, "but I saw her just before she went to Paris in the autumn, and it grieved me to see her so changed now. I did not notice it at first, for she was talking to the children in her

old way, she had always the pleasantest way of any lady I know ; but in a minute she sat down on this bench, and looked so pale I thought she was going to faint. She only laughed when I said so, but then I think she forgot where she was, for she sat quite still with her head leaning back against the wall, and her hands lying in her lap, looking through the trees at the stream with the saddest face I ever saw, and I have seen some sad ones in my day, Monsieur. I wondered what her trouble could be—they say her husband is come back, and that he is a bad man who will spend all her money—but I had not heard of it then. I wouldn't seem to watch her and turned away, but in a minute little Marcel, who knows no better, came running up, as children will, and began playing with her cloak, putting his cheek against it, because it was pretty and soft. I would have pulled him away, but all at once she roused herself, and took him on her knee. 'How your little ones grow, Madame Dubois,' she said in her cheerful way, 'they must be great blessings to you.' 'No doubt they are, Madame,' I answered, 'but one may have too much of a blessing sometimes, as I say to my husband when the water rises and floods the kitchen.' 'Ah, well !' she said, 'but you wouldn't know what to do without the water, or the children either,' and with that she kissed little Marcel again, and set him down, and said she must be going. It was the next day we heard she was ill, and I have not seen her since."

"If Monsieur would like to take the short cut across the fields," Madame Dubois began again as Humphrey turned to go, "Jeanne can show him the way. She has to take home Madame's laces and things : I always do her fine washing when she is at the château."

Humphrey, in haste to find himself there now, willingly accepted the offer, and Jeanne, furnished with a basket and many instructions, and with her finger still in her mouth, trotted before him along the narrow field paths, looking back from time to time to make sure that he was following. They had not far to go ; across two

fields and along a short muddy lane, and then they emerged on the high road again in full view of the château.

It was a long weather-stained building standing on rising ground, with steep pointed roofs and many windows, and an old grey tower at the end. Purple-brown rolling woods sheltered it at the back; in front was a gravel terrace, with square boxes to hold orange-trees, and an old stone balustrade in front. A flight of steps led down to the lower level of the rough lawn; it sloped between the avenue and the woods that skirted it on either side, down to the stream, which, crossed by a wooden bridge, divided this part of the grounds from the fields beyond. The place looked homelike, and yet had a somewhat deserted air under the dull February sky, as places from which a master's hand has long been absent are wont to have.

Little Jeanne faithfully accompanied Humphrey to the front door, then vanished round the corner of the house to make her way in by some back entrance. Humphrey, on his side, was presently conducted through a matted hall with a pyramid of evergreens in the centre, through a long room with a billiard-table at one end, into a smaller chintz-lined drawing room, with windows looking out on some brown flower-beds at the back and the woods rising behind. Ersilia was there, seated by the fire, turning over some papers and parchments she had taken from a tin box that stood open beside her. She looked up inquiringly as the door opened, then seeing who it was, rose and came forward quickly with both hands extended.

"Welcome, welcome!" she said, then stopped short, the color fading from her very lips. "There is nothing wrong—you bring no bad news?" she said.

"No, nothing—all is well," answered Humphrey hastily, divining her thought. "I am afraid I have startled you by coming unexpectedly, I should have written to let you know beforehand."

"No, no, it is good of you to come," she said, placing

her cold hand in his, "come and sit down—what a surprise—what a pleasure to see you!"

Humphrey drew a chair opposite to her at the fire, but he could not speak at first. She was so changed—he could not have believed that four weeks could so have changed her. Her face had grown thin; her brown hair lay like a heavy shadow on her delicately blue-veined temples, her lips were parched, and there was that slight contraction of the brow and nostrils that gives a look of habitual pain to the face. Only her eyes seemed to have gained an added intensity, and the sweet animation that had made the ever-varying charm of her countenance was not wholly gone even now, for it sprang from the unceasing thought for others that was the strongest habit of her life.

"You look tired and cold, Humphrey," she was saying now. "What time did you leave Paris? I will order some refreshments for you at once."

Her hand was on the bell, but he stopped her. "Don't ring," he said, "I don't want anything really, I did not leave Paris till eleven." Then looking not at her, but at the fire, for one glance had taken in the forlorn change that cut him to the heart, "You have been ill," he said. "I was told at the mill that you had had the fever."

"Not so bad as that," she answered, "a feverish cold—influenza—I hardly know what; but I am well again now, as you see." She collected her scattered papers and put them on one side; then leaning forward with her hands tightly clasped, "Tell me everything, Humphrey," she said, with a look in her eyes that told him as no words could have done, the hunger for tidings that had grown from one slow hour to another through these weeks.

He told her everything; each day that had passed since she went away—for monotonous as the days had been, each had a distinctive character of its own for him then. She put hardly any questions, only, when he paused, her grey eyes, with their heart-constraining gaze, still asked for more. They seemed to gather a softer light as he went

on, as one who, after long stumbling through dark places, should once more see a beloved face, though it were through mists and driving rain. Humphrey related each fact as it came, only tried to soften his own strong impression of Mr. Fleming's silent desolation, passing lightly indeed over the last twenty-four hours, which had left an undefined weight on his own mind. I do not know that it was of much use ; I believe she divined all that he would not say, for in her memory lay an hour of which he had no knowledge—that in which she had told Mr. Fleming that they must part. She did not speak at once when he had finished, but in a minute she held out her hand to him again.

"Thank you," she said ; then, after a moment's pause, "God bless you for coming, Humphrey—the time has seemed very long."

She sat silent awhile, her cheek resting on her hand. "Mr. Fleming has been painting, you say?" she went on, presently.

"Yes ; he has been painting a good deal," said Humphrey.

"That is well—what pictures do you say he has been at work on?"

He told her, and then again there was a silence. Now that the simple narrative of facts was over, it seemed as if there were no words to utter that would not be painful. Ersilia was the first to rouse herself.

"Shall we go out?" she said, rising. "You will sleep here to-night, of course, and we shall have time to go into the garden and woods before it gets dark ; there are one or two points of view I should like you to see. Aunt Mathilde is out this afternoon ; she has gone to see one of our neighbors—we have a few neighbors," she said, smiling a little, "though they live a good way off—but she will be in presently."

The garden lay to the left of the château, sheltered to the north by a row of lime-trees. It was a damp overgrown place merging into the farmyard beyond, and Ersilia, as they walked along, spoke of what she wished

to have done to it next summer. They made the circuit of the farm building, standing grey and homelike in the midst of apple-trees and wide pastures, then, crossing the terrace again, passed on into the wood beyond. It seemed easier to wander there than to sit in silence with hearts full of sad memories they dared not speak of.

No present pain, no dread of the future, no thought even of his master who was never absent from his thoughts, could prevent Humphrey's finding that hour an exquisite one. The sun was setting as they passed along the terrace, which lay fronting the full light of the western sky, and through openings in the wood they could catch glimpses here and there of a yellow glow above the far blue horizon. Overhead the breaking clouds showed a pale blue sky between grey flakes, and presently a thin moon shone down, casting a faint radiance crossed by interlacing shadows on their path. The birds were silent, and there were no leaves but the leaves of last year that lay thick between their feet, and rustled brown and crisp in sheltered hollows above their heads; but the first primroses were scattered like mild fallen stars, and everywhere the faint stirring of the wind was as the stirring of the new year's growth in bud and twig and branch. Humphrey walked on as through an enchanted land that had neither beginning nor ending—it was only an hour's dream snatched in the midst of sorrow, dreamt in the light of the grey eyes at his side—it faded as they presently emerged upon more open ground, and in the clearer light he could see plainly the pale changed face whose pain no dream could come to soften.

Ersilia had spoken little since they came out, except to question Humphrey in her old kind way about his pictures and his work; but now they paused at the edge of a deep natural pool where the dim lights and shadows of the upper world wavered away into mysterious darkness, and whence down a long opening in the trees they could see the château lights shining through leafless branches.

"I came upon some old designs the other day," Ersilia said, "for altering and improving the château grounds.

Amongst other things it was proposed to plant this opening as a formal alley, with a marble fountain here in the place of this pool."

"I like it better as it is," said Humphrey, "don't you?"

"The design looked well on paper," she answered; "but it is not one of the things I should care to set about doing. There are others more urgent that ought to be, indeed must be attended to—when I quite know how to get things done," she said, smiling a little.

"You still find difficulties in your way then?" said Humphrey.

"Yes," she said, walking slowly onwards towards the château, "there are difficulties, and more than I had at first imagined. Lebrun is honest as he can be, but he is obstinate, and getting old, and every day I find something that is going wrong through neglect. Some things I am obliged to insist on, but that creates discontent, and makes the next step all the harder."

"I should think it would be best to get rid of him altogether," said Humphrey, "and make a fresh beginning with somebody else."

"No, I cannot do that at present," she answered, "nor, as things are, do I know that it would do much good. I think there is no such thing in life, Humphrey, as a really fresh beginning. Every action seems weighted with all that has gone before for good or evil, and it is best, if possible, to work with the materials one has; so it seems to me, at least. And I am not afraid but that all will come right in time—if no other complications arise."

"You think of remaining on here then?" said Humphrey. It was a thoughtless question, that he repented the next moment having asked.

"I am not sure," she said hastily. "I cannot look forward—I cannot make any plans at present. I live—I awake in the morning, and I am alive—"

She broke off abruptly, and turned away her head, and Humphrey, angry at his own stupidity, walked on in

silence at her side. They had reached the end of the glade by this time and were on the terrace again, where the shadow of the château roofs and tower lay defined by the faint moonlight. The deep bark of a dog was heard, answered by a shriller chorus from the farmyard beyond; a carriage was driving away from the front door of the château, and a large wolf-hound came bounding up to Ersilia, thrusting its head under her hand as though to receive an accustomed caress, then bounded off again, leaping and barking at the horses.

"Aunt Mathilde has come back," said Ersilia, "we must go in, Humphrey. And yet it seems a pity, it is such a lovely evening."

They stood still a moment, looking at the dying light that still lingered in the west, and the misty country spread between, then they turned to go into the house. But when they were at the door Humphrey paused again. He was to leave early the next morning, he might not have another opportunity of speaking to Ersilia alone; and yet he hesitated, fearing to give her fresh pain.

"Have you—is there any message I can take to Mr. Fleming?" he said, stammering a little over his words, "anything you would wish me to tell him?"

She did not answer at once, but even in the uncertain light he could see how her face changed and flushed.

"Oh, what can I bid you tell him?" she said at last, "what could I say that he does not know already, what words that would not seem a mockery from me to him? Oh, why did he ever know me? He was happy till I came. Who am I that I should have crossed a beautiful life—" she could not go on, she stood leaning, shaken with emotion, against the old stone wall. "Tell him," she said, recovering her voice, "tell him I have found but one clue in the darkness, that no one of God's creatures was born for despair, that we must have patience—have patience—"

She wrung her hands as he had seen her do once before, and passed on before him into the house. In the hall they were met by Mademoiselle Mathilde, who at

once began to talk and scold after her usual fashion, as she accompanied them into the drawing-room.

"Ersilia, what do you mean by being out at this time of the evening? You will certainly be ill and in bed again to-morrow. Go and lie down at once—. How do you do, Mr. Humphrey? I heard you had arrived; I am delighted to see you again. Sit down, sit down. Well, Ersilia, I found Madame de P—— at home, and she is the most charming person. I was only just in time, for they all go to Paris next week for the marriage of the second daughter to that M. de L——, you know, we so often met in the winter. She had set her heart upon a title, her mother said, otherwise—not but that there is money, plenty of money, on both sides. And the week after, the eldest daughter makes her profession in the Ursuline Convent at D——. Madame de P—— is heart-broken; the whole family went down on their knees to her, but it was of no use. That old widow Bertrand was here just now, Ersilia. She said she wanted to speak to you; something about her house it was, I believe; but I told her you were out, and that when you came in you would be lying down till dinner-time, so that if her business was pressing, she had better go and speak to Lebrun about it. So she went away."

"Dear Aunt Mathilde," said Ersilia, impatiently, crossing the room and ringing the bell, "I have not the slightest intention of lying down, and I particularly wish to see the widow Bertrand myself. It is not of the least use to send her to Lebrun; Lebrun wants to keep her on in that old damp cottage that ought to have been pulled down years ago, and I will not have it. I cannot—I will not consent to be crossed in everything I propose." Then, as the servant appeared, "Jean," she said, "send some one to call the widow Bertrand back—she cannot have gone far down the avenue, and show her into the library. I wish to speak to her."

She stood still for a moment with flushed cheeks and tears of irritation and weakness in her eyes, then left the room. It is in every-day events that the tragedies of life

for the most part reveal themselves, and Ersilia, though sometimes perplexed over the new duties that had fallen upon her, had generally so much of the calmness and backwardness of a strong nature that does not care to assert its conscious power, that this little incident showed Humphrey, as nothing else could have done, what she must have gone through during the last few weeks.

He understood it still better later on in the evening. Ersilia, out of compunction perhaps for her momentary impatience, submitted to be sent to bed early, and then Mademoiselle Mathilde, glad of an auditor, told Humphrey in her usual trenchant way, much that he could not otherwise have learned.

"Ersilia has been very ill," she said, "she caught cold in some way, and for three days could hardly raise her head, and there is a sort of low fever hanging about her still, the doctor says, though she will go about as usual. She walks, and drives, and writes, does everything in short but eat and sleep. I daresay she was out with you this whole afternoon, Mr. Humphrey."

"Only for an hour," said the lad penitently, "and I did not know—has she heard from Prince Zاراikine, Mademoiselle?"

"Heard? of course she has heard. You don't suppose he is going to let her alone, now that he has come to life again, and wants money. Not but what he can get that without her help. My brother-in-law provided admirably for that, if for nothing else."

"Surely he cannot touch her property?" said Humphrey.

"I don't know what he cannot do," said Mademoiselle Mathilde; "no, he cannot touch her property, I believe, but he can spend her income, which comes to the same thing. But if that were all, even, one might be thankful. I don't suppose he could take everything, and at the worst she could come and live with me; I have enough for her and for myself too, now, thank God. If at least he would leave her in peace, as he used to do—but not

at all. He talks of coming here ; he wishes to form an establishment in Paris. His countess is dead ; he does not say so in his letters, but I know it for a fact ; he is tired of wandering, his health is broken—he wants to be *Grand Seigneur* in short, with Ersilia for a *garde-malade*, and an ornament to his drawing-room.”

“The idea is preposterous,” said Humphrey hastily. “I—all her friends must take measures to prevent her being annoyed.”

“Of course it is preposterous, and yet, if you will believe me, that is one of the things Ersilia is breaking her heart over. You see, Mr. Humphrey,” Mademoiselle Mathilde went on, with more feeling than she often allowed herself to show, “Ersilia has never been like other girls. Most women would have thought themselves well rid of such a husband, but I believe she was absolutely sorry when the news of his death came. She never spoke to me about it, nor to anyone else that I know of, but one does not live six years with a girl without finding out something of what passes in her mind ; and I know, as well as if she had told me, that she had set her heart, as girls will, you know, upon nothing so much as her husband coming back to her. And now he has come back, and everything is altered. Ersilia is what I call a good woman, Mr. Humphrey ; I wish I were half as good myself. She has her faults, no doubt—who has not ? but what I mean is, she cares more for doing right than for anything else—according to her own notions, of course. Now, she has always had her own notion of what a good wife ought to be, and, as long as she thought her husband was alive, she was as single-hearted as a child. And now that he has come back, she is ready to break her heart because she is in love with somebody else—as if she could help it.”

Humphrey looked at Mademoiselle Mathilde with some surprise. She found out his thought in a moment.

“Yes, I know what you are thinking,” she said, nodding at him. “You are wondering how a silly old woman like me, who is always trying to make the best

of the little bit of the world that is left to her, should understand Ersilia so well. But you see I was young myself once, and had plenty of trouble too, and perhaps never expected to be quite such a silly old woman as I have turned out. When we are young we don't know what we shall be like when we are old, Mr. Humphrey, partly because when we grow old, we don't feel at all as we supposed we should ; you will find that out for yourself some day, if you live long enough. I was never so clever or so good as Ersilia, who has faults all the same, especially just now, poor dear child, when talking to her is like treading on gunpowder ; still, as I say, I was young myself once, and can understand what Ersilia is feeling, well enough."

"I don't doubt it indeed, Mademoiselle," said Humphrey, ashamed of his momentary thought, "I am quite sure that what you say is true."

"Not but that I think Ersilia carries her notions of things too far," Mademoiselle Mathilde went on, nodding again in acknowledgment of Humphrey's apology, "she is always in extremes, as I tell her. What need, for instance, had she to come and bury herself here, when one can't even mention Mr. Fleming's name without her running out of the room? And he is just as bad at his end, I daresay. She might stay in Paris and see him sometimes, and yet kill no one, so far as I can see. Why should she sacrifice him altogether? He has some claims upon her, it seems to me, as well as her husband ; and for that matter, if everyone were so particular— But I dare not say such things to Ersilia. If I only hint at them, it is as if she would go out of her mind altogether. Do sit down, Mr. Humphrey, I cannot talk to you if you keep wandering about," for Humphrey had started up and was walking up and down the room. There was nothing in the world that he would not have done to give Ersilia happiness, but this perpetual contemplation of a misery he could move neither one way nor the other to relieve, was maddening. Nor did Mademoiselle Mathilde's conversation, kind and faithful

at heart as she was, tend to soothe his mind ; he was glad that she should be silent for a little while.

"I don't see that anything *can* be done just now," he said despondingly at last, going back to a former part of their conversation, "only when Prince Zaraikine comes back from Belgium, I do think he ought to be prevented in some way from troubling his wife. She is not strong enough to bear it now. And if I can be of the least use, Mademoiselle, you will let me know."

"Yes, yes, I will let you know," she said kindly, "not that I suppose Ersilia would allow any one to interfere between herself and her husband ; otherwise she has old friends who would be willing enough to help her, no doubt. There is her godfather, Colonel Sidney, the father-in-law of her friend, Mrs. Sidney ; she has always corresponded with him and has written to him since she has been here, I know."

"Has she?" said Humphrey, half vexed ; the lad had pleased himself with the thought that as Ersilia's nearest relation, he was the only person to whom she would turn in case of need. "I never heard of him before," he said ; "but in any case you will write to me, Mademoiselle ; so long a silence is not to be endured again."

"Yes, I will write," she said, shaking him warmly by the hand, as she wished him good-night. "I should have written before, but Ersilia was ill, and there was one thing and another, and I put it off from day to day. But I will write now, Mr. Humphrey, I promise you."

Humphrey was shown to a room at the end of a long corridor looking out upon the avenue. A fire was burning brightly, and the simple furniture, the blue chintz hangings, the brown wainscoting, and the dimly polished floor awakened in him vague, pleasant memories of the little brown room that had been his in his early home. He set his candle on the bureau, and opened the long window to the night. The air was mild and still, and the deep silence after the hollow echoes of Paris worked in him a strange sleeplessness. Hour after hour he sat

at the window, thinking on this day, and on all the days that had gone before, and one by one led up to it. Why had it all been? Why? Why should two people have met, between whom there could henceforth be nothing but separation and an unchanging pain . . . Who has not in like manner sat questioning fate through midnight hours and found no answer? The fire died out; the moon which had grown brighter and brighter as the night drew on and the vapors melted away, sank behind the black branches of a spreading oak-tree. The stars came out before the dawn; the cocks shrilly greeted each other from afar, the air grew chill, and still Humphrey sat on, filled with thoughts whose sadness gradually attuned itself to the still gravity of the long hours. It was not till a footstep was heard in the avenue below, till a wagon came creaking along, and a hundred cheery sounds began to awake, that he flung himself upon the bed for two or three hours of dreamless sleep.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

Across the Frontier.

HUMPHREY left the château early and arrived in Paris about one o'clock. He somehow felt happier than when he went away, more hopeful, more cheerful. He could have assigned no distinct reason for this change of mood, for every fact remained unaltered ; but with people of an impressionable turn of mind, facts sometimes play but a shadowy part in the mental landscape, and like mountain tops are apt to depend upon extraneous influences for their effect of reality. Humphrey, as he travelled back to Paris, was conscious of little but Ersilia's parting look and smile—that exquisite smile which seemed to recognize and appeal to every nobler quality of the lad's heart, and he was ready to believe that, in a world still capable of being so illuminated, everything must in some unimagined way come right, and all be happy yet.

It was with the hope of imparting some of this renewed cheerfulness to Mr. Fleming that he reached the Rue de Clichy and ran up stairs. He had a pass-key, and opened the outer door as usual ; but in the entry he was met by old Marguerite, who had been on the watch for him apparently, for she came out of the kitchen as she heard the front door close.

"Ah ! here you are," she said, "I was wondering when you would be back. I have a message for you from Monsieur. He is gone."

"Gone !" said Humphrey, "what do you mean ? Where to ?"

"He is gone to Brussels," said the old woman, "he bid

me tell you he should be back in two or three days. He left yesterday evening about six o'clock."

Humphrey could not answer. He felt as though every hidden foreboding had suddenly taken shape, and leaped into life. Mr. Fleming gone! gone when he was expecting Humphrey to return with news of Ersilia. Mechanically the lad opened the door of the studio and went in, as though he should find some explanation there.

The studio was as he had left it. The easels stood in their places, Mr. Fleming's painting things were lying about, as he had left them two days before, when he had gone out to walk in the Tuileries Gardens. He had not touched them since. All was as when Humphrey went away, only on the mantel-piece lay a letter addressed to himself in his master's handwriting. He opened it quickly. There were only a few lines with neither date nor signature, and the writing was blurred and broken, as though traced by a hand too worn out almost to hold the pen.

"I am not mad, Humphrey," Mr. Fleming wrote, "but I shall become so if I remain any longer at the mercy of the thought that has been torturing me all these weeks. I must see that man, if it is only for five minutes, that I may know his face and remember it. It maddens me that I can form no distinct image of him. Day and night he comes between me and her—and his face is always a blank. All last night he was in the room with me, watching me, moving when I moved—I am not strong my boy; these last few weeks have shaken me, I feel. To-night you will be away; I cannot face that hour of darkness again and alone—Darkness I can bear; what else remains for me now? But there is a worse than darkness, in which something moves and is nothing—

"If Mr. Murray should send for the Alcestis, let him have it; it is quite ready. Anything else can wait for my return. I expect to be back in three days at the latest. I only want to see him; then, perhaps, this

fever will go of itself, and I shall be better able to endure to the end."

Humphrey read the letter through twice, and as he read he understood, as though he himself had experienced it, how the dominant thought had grown and grown through these silent weeks till it overshadowed every other. Not mad! Good God! what then is madness?

He went out again and called "Marguerite!" The old woman appeared at the kitchen-door, wiping her hands on her apron.

"Did you find a note in there?" she said. "I forgot to tell you that Monsieur left one for you."

"Yes, I found it," said Humphrey. "Tell me, Marguerite, what time did Mr. Fleming leave yesterday?"

"He went out first about two o'clock," she said. "I was in and out all the morning to look after the fire, and he never moved or spoke, till about two o'clock he got up all at once and went out without saying a word. I heard him come in again just as it was striking four, and presently he called to me in the kitchen and told me to make him a cup of coffee. When I took it in he was writing, and about six o'clock he went away."

"And he told you he was going to Brussels?" said Humphrey, "did he say nothing more? How did he seem, Marguerite? Did he look ill?"

"Much the same as usual, Monsieur; dreamy, as if he were not quite sure what he was about; you know his way sometimes. No, he said nothing but what I told you; there was more in the note, though, I daresay?"

"Not much more," said Humphrey, absently. He went back into the studio, and stood reflecting for a minute: then taking up his hat again he ran down stairs, and began walking rapidly in the direction of the Rue de Seine.

On his way he bought a railway guide. He had at once taken a resolution to follow Mr. Fleming to Brussels, and he was going now to the Rue de Seine to learn, if possible, Prince Zaraikine's exact address from the

concierge at his old quarters. He had at once, I say, taken his resolution, and he never wavered for a moment in carrying it out. The precise nature of his fears it might be hard to define ; they had all that vagueness of outline which leaves the fullest scope to the imagination. What might he not fear from a meeting between his master and Prince Zaraikine ? Every word of M. Rossel's that had betrayed not only an instinctive dislike to Mr. Fleming, but the existence of some distinct private animosity towards him, returned to his memory now.

Randolph never knew, though he might dimly guess in after-years, what the origin of that animosity was. He never knew how M. Rossel had arrived at the knowledge of a story that he had not hesitated to use basely when the opportunity offered. But that in so using it, he had been animated by something beyond the mere exigency of the moment, Humphrey could not doubt, in thinking, as he had done again and again during these past few weeks, over the blackest hour of his own life. For himself, the first hour of the agony was passed ; it was not in the lad's nature to brood in unavailing remorse over a deed that had been effaced so far as is possible by an accepted repentance. But it could never pass from his mind, and there had been another hour, when penetrated to the soul by a noble goodness and generosity, he had vowed a life-long devotion to those who had so come to his help in the darkest moments he had ever known. It was but little he could do, he had thought bitterly more than once since then ; but now a great danger, as it seemed to him, had risen before them, and for the sake of both he resolved that, so far as he could prevent it, no meeting should take place between Mr. Fleming, broken in health and spirits, and a man who had shown himself incapable of one sentiment of scrupulous honor.

Arrived at the Rue de Seine, he found, as he had indeed feared might be the case, that M. Rossel had left no address beyond Poste Restante, Brussels. No matter, he could make inquiries at the different Brussels

hotels; of Mr. Fleming at least he would surely hear something, even though Prince Zaraikine should have taken rooms elsewhere.

He went back to the studio to make his last few arrangements. Fortunately he had plenty of money; only two days before he had received the dividends that represented half his yearly income, so that on that point he had no anxiety. When all was ready, he had still found more than an hour to spare, and he employed it in setting the studio in order. He cleaned Mr. Fleming's palettes and hung them up, put away his colors and brushes, and pushed back the easels. He felt as though a long and uncertain journey lay before him from which he might never return. As he went round the room, he came upon a half embroidered handkerchief, and a little gold-fitted étui lying forgotten under some dusty music that had not been moved for weeks; he recognized them as Ersilia's and put them away carefully in a drawer. Then all at once, with a sort of dismay at his own arrangements, as though a prophecy were speaking through them, he pulled the easels out again into their old places, and set the pictures in their best light; in two or three days he and his master would be back again, and all would be as before.

Old Marguerite put her head in at the door whilst he was still busy. "What are you about?" she said, "you look as if you were preparing for a ball. Are you going away too? What, to Brussels?" Then, as Humphrey nodded, "Wait till I bring you some coffee then, and something to eat as well, or you will be going away without your dinner, as I believe Monsieur did. I never thought of it till he was off."

She came back presently with some coffee and a cutlet. "One would think we were all turning into a flock of wild geese," she said, "who must needs fly one after the other. First Madame goes, poor soul, and then you go after her; then Monsieur goes, and then you go after him. I shall have to go next, and bring you all back again."

"I wish you could, Marguerite," said Humphrey despondently, "but I am afraid no one can do that."

"Courage, courage," she said, "who knows? Only bring Monsieur back first, or he will be falling ill somewhere with no one to look after him. He has been looking like a ghost lately."

Humphrey was tired out, and slept profoundly that night with the relaxation of mind that comes after exertion, when nothing more can be done for a given number of hours. As in a dream he saw the lights flashing on the frontier, and passed through the douane with a procession of sleepy passengers, and he was hardly yet awake when the train rolled slowly into the Brussels station the next morning. He found himself standing on the platform with his travelling bag in his hand, and a bewildering sense of unreality about all that he had done, or was going to do. Then all at once he roused himself and was alive again—more intensely alive, he thought, than he had ever been in his life before.

He called a carriage, and, jumping into it, desired the coachman to drive to each of the principal hotels in succession; at one or other of them he thought, he must surely gain some tidings. It was a little open carriage that had answered to his call; the weather was unusually mild and bright for February, the streets were already full of passers-by, and he drove along with the sense of isolation in the midst of a current of life that overtakes a stranger in an unknown city. The morning sun was shining on the unfamiliar roofs and gables, the more unfamiliar, it seemed to him, that they were so familiar to everyone else; towers and spires glowed in the early beams; the shadows fell across the winding streets. Randolph has often been to Brussels since then, but he still retains, distinct from all other memories, that first impression of the bright and varied city, an impression of sunshine darkened, as it were, by the increasing pain and anxiety of the passing hours.

It was, in fact, some hours, during which he had visited most of the hotels in the upper and lower towns,

before he came upon the desired clue. More than once, indeed, he was told that an Englishman answering to his description, had the day before been making inquiries similar to his own ; and each time the words carried a fresh pang to the lad's heart as he seemed to see the forlorn figure of his master wandering to and fro with bent head, and the look in his eyes that Humphrey had often noticed in these last days, and that he knew how to interpret now. But of Prince Zaraikine, or M. Rossel, he could hear nothing. Always, as he drove up and down the streets, he looked eagerly amongst the passers-by, longing and dreading to distinguish one or other of two familiar faces, and always in vain. It was already late in the forenoon when the carriage stopped before the door of almost the last of the hotels that they had not yet visited, a small second-rate one in the lower town.

"Yes, a gentleman answering to that description had been staying there," the porter said. "M. Rossel—yes ; Monsieur might read his name in the visitors' book. He had been there for nearly a month, and had left only two days before for Lille. And an English gentleman had been there yesterday inquiring for him, but he had not stayed ; he had left again immediately on hearing that M. Rossel was no longer there."

Humphrey only waited to make sure that no further information was to be gained ; then, getting into the carriage again, he told the coachman to drive to the station for Lille.

Railway communication was less frequent and less direct five-and-twenty years ago than it is now. There was no train leaving for some hours, no possibility of reaching Lille before ten o'clock that night. An enforced pause, when all our energies are strung to reach a given point, makes us feel as though Fate itself were fighting against us, and had touched our hands to make us helpless. Humphrey had counted with certainty upon seeing Mr. Fleming that day, and sick at heart now with this sudden frustration, with the despairing conviction that these wasted hours would make all his efforts vain, he turned

away. He wandered down again into the lower town, he made his way into Ste. Gudule, he lingered about the old market-place. He remembered standing forlornly in the midst, gazing up at the soaring detail of the Hôtel-de-Ville with eyes that had ceased to see anything but the oak and beech woods, the weather stained walls and roofs of La Chênaie. Was it only yesterday that he had been there? What long miles, what endless hours, seemed to lie between it and him! And as he thought of Ersilia, he thanked Heaven again, as he had done more than once before, that she at least was spared the suspense of that slow moving day, which seemed to unfold itself reluctantly as a flower conscious of a deadly blight at its core.

He was almost glad when presently the sky clouded over, and it began to rain. He took shelter in a restaurant, and waited there till it was time to return to the station. The evening closed in rapidly, the wind rose, the rain poured down in torrents, dashing against the windows of the train as it flew through the long flats. By the time Lille was reached, it was a perfect hurricane.

Humphrey, too impatient to leave all further inquiries till the morning, had nevertheless foreseen the difficulty he might find in making the round of the city in such weather and at that hour of the night. But chance favored him. The very first hotel to which he drove proved to be the right one. M. Rossel was there? No, but he had been there only yesterday, might possibly be back again in a day or two; he was gone to Z——, a small Belgian village about twenty miles off across the frontier. And Mr. Fleming had been there also; he had slept at the hotel the previous night, and had left for Z—— that morning.

For the first time Humphrey's heart failed him. It was less that he felt utterly discouraged than that, as happens to us all in moments of continued hindrance and frustration, he began to question the reasonableness of his own actions. What, after all, had brought him here? Surely Mr. Fleming, who could pursue an end with so

much patience and perseverance, might be trusted not to break down now. He might very probably be annoyed by Humphrey's following him, at the very least laugh at him for a foolish boy. So the lad argued with himself for about two minutes, during which he half resolved to give up his enterprise altogether, and take the next train back to Brussels. Then suddenly his doubts and fears returned in double force, and he was entreating the people of the hotel to let him have some sort of vehicle at any price that would take him on to Z—— that night.

It was impossible, they said. No horse, no man, could venture out on such a night, along rough country roads. Monsieur could sleep at the hotel, and have a carriage at what hour he pleased the next morning. If he left at seven, he might expect to be at Z—— by a little after ten. More than that they could not do.

Humphrey was obliged to submit, and to take the room that was offered him. He remembers the long hours of that night, the sound of the rain in the street, the lamps blown by the wind. At midnight the storm was at its height, but towards morning it subsided, and as Humphrey drove out of Lille, he saw before him a grey watery land stretching clear beneath the low-hanging grey sky. The road crossed the frontier, and penetrated some distance into the country beyond, then turned back again at a wide angle, to approach the frontier once more. Z—— was only five miles from the boundary line, the driver said, but the road wound and turned, and lengthened out the distance.

The horses were fresh and good, but the roads were heavy after the rain, and they made but slow progress. It was nearly eleven o'clock, and a gleam of sunshine was struggling through the clouds, when the first houses of Z—— came in sight. It was a clean-looking place, with one long wide street of white, blue and yellow painted houses, and the church standing in the midst. There was a military depôt apparently, for about a quarter of a mile outside the village they passed a low white building, with soldiers lounging at the door, and sitting

on benches outside. At the other extremity of the street stood the only hotel, the Aigle d'Or, also a white building, proclaiming its name in large gold letters on the front. The village ended here ; beyond, a stone-paved road seemed to lead for miles through a stunted forest.

The carriage stopped, and with a beating heart, Humphrey got down and went into the house. The place had a somewhat deserted look ; no one came out to meet him, and after waiting for a moment, he opened a door to the left, which he supposed might lead into a public room. He was not mistaken. He found himself in a small, empty *salle-à-manger*, with a door opening into another long room, which crossed this smaller one at right angles. Humphrey went in. There was a billiard-table at one end, a dining-table at the other ; a waiter was moving about, and a thin brown man in the dress of a Belgian officer was reading a newspaper. It was to the former that Humphrey addressed himself.

"Had a white-haired gentleman of the name of Rossel, and an Englishman with a long beard—" He was beginning his usual formula, then stopped short. The officer looked up from his newspaper, and the waiter, an intelligent-looking lad, paused in rubbing up his wine-glasses to exchange glances with him. Humphrey, swift to take alarm, looked from one to the other.

"They have been here," the boy said slowly. "M. Rossel left early this morning, and the English gentleman is here still—but—"

"For God's sake speak out," said Humphrey impetuously, "tell me everything. It cannot be worse than I fear. Is he dead?"

"Not dead," said the Belgian in a kind voice, and rising, "but we fear dangerously hurt."

"In a duel?"

They did not speak, but Humphrey read the answer in their looks.

CHAPTER XXIX.

Too Late.

HE felt stunned for a moment, for to expect the worst is only to cheat ourselves into leaving a wide margin for hopefulness. Then recovering himself,

"Where is he?" he said, "I must go to him at once."

"I think you cannot go just now," said the officer, laying his hand on the lad's arm, "the surgeon who was sent for this morning, is with him again. You are some relation? Not his son, I trust?"

"No, no relation," said Humphrey, "he was only the best, the kindest friend—" his voice broke, and he turned away. "Did you say that he is dangerously hurt?" he went on after a minute.

"I am afraid so," said the officer, "our surgeon was sent for at half-past seven this morning, and I went with him to the ground where the duel was fought. He is a man of great experience, and I could see at once that he thought seriously of the case—it is best to tell you the truth?" he said, looking inquiringly at Humphrey.

"Yes, yes," he answered, "tell me the truth."

"I am glad you are come," the Belgian went on with a kindly compassion in his voice, "for Mr. Fleming seems to be quite without friends here. It is not even known how the dispute that ended so fatally arose. M. Rossel and the gentleman who acted with him disappeared immediately the affair was over, and no one in the hotel knew what was going on till a man came to ask for assistance."

"The thing is absurd," said Humphrey, in mingled

anger and misery, "M. Rossel must have urged on the quarrel. Mr. Fleming never fought, never would have dreamed of fighting a duel in his life. He is the gentlest and kindest of men. It could not have happened now, if he had been himself, but he has been through great trouble, great grief lately—" He broke off again, as he felt his eyes filling with irrepressible tears. He stood leaning back against the table, grasping it tightly with both hands in the effort to master his emotion, whilst his companion walked with long strides up and down the room.

"Who can have acted as Mr. Fleming's second," Humphrey presently said more calmly, "he cannot have gone on the ground alone, and he is, as you say, quite without friends here."

"It was a young Frenchman staying in the hotel," said the officer. "I talked with him for a few minutes, and he seemed to me an honorable and kind-hearted young fellow. He remained with Mr. Fleming till the surgeon had arrived, and every possible assistance had been given; then, not wishing probably to be further involved in the affair, he went away. But before going he gave me his card with his address."

The officer took a card from his pocket-book and handed it to Humphrey. It had on it the name Jules Bellair, and an address scribbled in pencil below. That very evening Randolph wrote to M. Bellair begging him to send all the information in his power, and received in return a statement, which as it was the only trustworthy account he ever had of that fatal night, may be given here.

"The duel was fairly and honorably conducted on both sides," M. Bellair wrote. "I was not present at the quarrel, but, as I understand, M. Rossel considered himself insulted by some expressions used by M. Fleming. I was staying at the Aigle d'Or for a few days, and had made some acquaintance with M. Rossel on the evening of his arrival at the hotel. He asked me some questions about the neighborhood, and mentioned in the course of

conversation that he had come to Z—— on important business. He was out all the next day, and I saw nothing of him till between eight and nine o'clock, when he came into the *salle-à-manger* and ordered some dinner. There were at that time three other people in the room, myself and two other men playing at billiards. M. Rossel had hardly finished dining, when M. Fleming came in. He had arrived at Z—— that morning, as I afterwards heard, but he had not been present at the *table-d'hôte*, and I had not seen him before. He asked for a cup of coffee, and said something in a low voice to the waiter, then, going up to the table, sat down opposite to M. Rossel. His manner and appearance were peculiar, and attracted everyone's attention. He looked perfectly pale and exhausted, and sat with his head resting on his hand gazing fixedly, yet absently, at M. Rossel, as though he were dreaming. It was not surprising that M. Rossel presently turned sharply round and spoke to him. I was at the other end of the room, and did not hear what was said, and in a minute they began talking in English or German — probably English. I was called away just then, but, returning in about an hour, I was met by one of the men with whom I had been playing billiards, who told me that there had been a quarrel, and that he believed a meeting was to be arranged between M. Rossel and the Englishman. It was no concern of his, he said, and he should keep clear of it. I went into the dining-room, where I found M. Fleming sitting alone as I had left him, with his head resting on his hand. I spoke to him, and finding, as I suspected might be the case, that he was a stranger without friends in Z——, I offered him my services, which he accepted. I was anxious to arrange the difference between him and M. Rossel, for M. Fleming seemed to be hardly conscious of what he was doing, and I felt convinced that he was suffering either from illness, or from the effect of some more severe mental shock; but my efforts were vain. M. Fleming said that he had no intention of offending M. Rossel, but he refused to recall any of his words; he also said that he had never

been engaged in an affair of this kind before, but that life and death were indifferent to him, and that it might proceed, or to that effect. He left everything to me. I remained with him most of the night; he did not go to bed, and hardly spoke except to answer questions; he sat as though dreaming awake. I left him about two in the morning, and returned at six. The meeting was arranged for seven. We left the house at different times, but I waited for him outside, and we walked together to the appointed place, a cleared opening in the forest about three-quarters of a mile from the hotel. The two parties were on the ground nearly at the same time. Some further efforts that were made to bring about a reconciliation were without effect. M. Rossel showed no eagerness to press on the duel, but he refused to withdraw without an apology, which M. Fleming on his side would not make. Both fired at the same moment. M. Fleming fired into the air, and dropped his pistol, and almost instantly fell back into my arms. M. Rossel's second came running up, and directly afterwards M. Rossel himself. He said 'Confound the fool, why did he come in my way?—I had no wish to kill him,' or some such words, and immediately left the ground. I hailed two men who had followed us at a distance, and sent one of them to the barracks for the army surgeon, the other to the hotel. M. Fleming remained with his head resting on my shoulder till assistance came. He was conscious, but spoke only once to thank me for what I had been able to do for him. I was much affected by this fatal termination to the affair; he saw it, and said with a manner so touching that I can never forget it, 'You are young, Monsieur, and have all the kindness and generosity of youth that we older men value so much. I have a lad at home, who will thank you better than I can, for having filled his place by me to-day.' I thought he spoke of his son, but on reading your letter, Monsieur, I perceived that yours must be the generous heart that was in his thoughts at that moment. He did not speak again till the surgeon arrived. He said then, 'It is of no use, doctor,' and immediately afterwards,

‘It is best so ; death is only a moment, but it may set more than one soul free.’ He doubtless saw, like everyone else, that the surgeon looked upon his case as hopeless. Immediately on being moved, he lost consciousness. I waited till I saw him carried towards the hotel and then left. I would willingly have stayed longer, but I had an important engagement, and any subsequent detention might have been attended by serious consequences to myself and others—”

Humphrey was still looking at the card given him by the Belgian officer, when footsteps and voices were heard approaching. There was a door opening from the *salle-d-manger* on to the hall and the foot of the staircase, and he could see a stout woman, whose dress and appearance showed her to be the landlady, coming down stairs, accompanied by a dark, gentlemanly-looking man.

“There is not the slightest hope,” the latter said, addressing the officer. “I have sent for a nurse, who, I hope, will be here in a few minutes, but it is simply a question of time. He is sinking now ; it merely depends on the strength of his constitution, how many hours he may live, and till he recovers full consciousness, as he probably will sooner or later, nothing can be done about sending to his friends.”

“That will be unnecessary,” said the officer, stepping back, and introducing Humphrey, who was behind him, “this gentleman has just arrived.”

The surgeon bowed and looked at Humphrey with keen, intelligent eyes. Humphrey himself had but one thought at that moment, to see his master. “Can I go now to Mr. Fleming?” was all he said.

“You can go,” said the surgeon, “but I must warn you to be careful not to rouse him in any way. Every minute of his life depends upon quiet. If you like to go up stairs at once, it is the second door to the left. I will follow you immediately.”

Humphrey went as directed. He found himself in a large, barely-furnished room, where Mr. Fleming was ly-

ing in a small iron bed placed near a window. His head was propped with pillows to help his hurried, irregular breathing, his eyes were half closed, his delicate, sensitive hands lay upon the counterpane. The nurse had not yet come, and he was alone for the moment, a loneliness that struck Humphrey to the heart. There are moments in our own and others' lives in which we say, "Is it towards this then that we have all this time been travelling?" and all the past, however diverse, seems all at once to have become only a slow and certain progress towards a fatal consummation. And yet as Humphrey stood now, looking down upon Mr. Fleming, he was less possessed, perhaps, by the thought that he was dying than by that sense of the immense gulf between life and death which makes us feel that while the loved one still breathes, with however faint a breath, we may yet claim and hold a part in him.

"Why do you say there is no hope?" he said, turning round almost fiercely on the surgeon who had come up to him. "I have seen him look almost as ill as this before. While there is life, there must be hope."

"There is none whatever," the surgeon answered with an accustomed, yet not unkindly manner. "It would be worse than useless to try to deceive you. The wound is mortal. We can send to Lille for further advice if you wish, but I assure you that nothing more can be done."

"Yes, I should wish it," said Humphrey more calmly. "I should not like any chance to be neglected. If—if it should be as you suppose," he went on hesitatingly, "how long do you think he has to live?"

"It is impossible to say exactly. Till to-morrow morning, till to-morrow night even—it is not possible to tell beforehand in these cases. It depends, as I was saying just now, upon the strength of the constitution. But if there is anyone you wish to send for, I advise you to lose no time."

"Yes, there is some one," said Humphrey. "There is no telegraph nearer than Lille, I suppose? Then, if

some one can be despatched at once for the doctor, I will send a message by the same opportunity."

The nurse, a *sœur de charité*, entered at this moment. "This is unnecessary," said Humphrey, "I can nurse Mr. Fleming myself. I have done so before when he has been ill ; he likes my nursing."

"An experienced woman is never out of place in these cases," said the surgeon, "you can be as much as you please with your friend, Monsieur, but it is advisable that he should be left alone as little as possible, and if you should be called away, it would be well to have some one to take your place."

"That is true," said the lad, who was at once irritated and influenced by the calmness of the surgeon's manner, "and I must go down stairs now." He waited for a minute, that he might hear what directions the surgeon was giving to the nurse, and then left the room to see about despatching a messenger as soon as possible to Lille.

He went down to the *salle-à-manger* which was empty now, and, asking for a pen and ink, sat down to write a telegraphic message to be forwarded to La Chênaie. He knew so well, he thought, that Ersilia would wish to be summoned, that the question never for a moment assumed the form of an argument in his mind. He only thought, as he framed his message, how he could best save her trouble and perplexity. He took out his railway guide and consulted it to see by what trains she could come. It was not necessary, he found, that she should go as far as Lille. There was another station at which she could stop, and though there would be a drive of eighteen or twenty miles across the country, it would save her three quarters of an hour of railway journey—so he calculated. But no train that she could take would enable her to reach Z—— before eleven o'clock the following night. It was a long time to look forward to in a life that was counted by minutes—the thought passed through Humphrey's mind, but still he did not hesitate ; he had a youthful faith in the force of will to accomplish results,

and it would have seemed to him impossible that Ersilia should come, and that she should come in vain.

He wrote and despatched his telegram, and then went up to his master's room again. He sent away the nurse, and, himself undertaking the charge of Mr. Fleming, sat beside him through long silent hours whilst the afternoon light declined over the wide, straight-lined country without. It was already late, and there was only a dim, red twilight in the window when the nurse came back with a candle, followed by the surgeon and the second doctor, who had just arrived from Lille. The consultation was very short, there was nothing to be done; they would keep him alive as long as they could, that was all.

The sudden light in the darkening room, and the movement around him, disturbed Mr. Fleming before the doctors began their examination. He opened his eyes, and his glance moved slowly from one to another till it rested upon Humphrey, and, as it did so, a half-unacknowledged dread of some hopeless, separating change in his master passed from the lad's mind. Mr. Fleming was quite conscious; only in his eyes was the dim and absent look that tells of slow-approaching death, when the pulses of life beat fainter and fainter to their final pause. He looked at Humphrey inquiringly, but without wonder.

"You here, my boy?" he said feebly, "how is that?"

"I heard you were at Z——, Sir," said Humphrey in a faltering voice, "and I followed you."

"That was kind of you—you have always been a good boy to me, Humphrey." He held out his hand, but said no more until the doctors had left the room. Humphrey, who had followed them to hear the final decision, came back with his last hope gone. He sat down again at Mr. Fleming's side, and laid his head on the pillow beside him with a sob that he could not control.

"My boy," said Mr. Fleming tenderly, "I have been a great fool, but you musn't make my folly seem worse by grieving over it too much."

"If I had only been here——" said Humphrey.

"You think I should have shown more wisdom?" Mr.

Fleming said, smiling faintly. "Well, it may be so—who knows? I should have been glad to have you with me, my boy." He was silent for a while. "You went to La Chênaie," he said then, "tell me about it."

Humphrey told him. He was very weak, and the tears rolled down slowly as he listened. "Everything else was hopeless," he said, "but my death will make life easier for her."

"She will not think so," said Humphrey, with a keen realization of what Ersilia would feel, that effaced all other considerations.

"In time," he said, "in time—" His voice died away with the last words; he seemed too weak almost for any sustained thought, and for a long while he lay silent. Humphrey thought he was dozing, and perhaps he was, but presently he stirred and spoke again.

"I wish she could have come to-day," he said, "the light is better than it has been for some time past I wish she could have come." He spoke and moved uneasily; his mind had wandered back to the last days that they had been together.

"She is coming, Sir," said Humphrey, using the first words that came in his wish to soothe him, "at least I have sent to her—and she is sure to come."

"What, here to Z—— do you mean?" said Mr. Fleming, roused for a moment to a fuller consciousness.

"Yes, Sir, I thought you would wish to see her."

He half raised himself on the pillows, his pale face flushed with some sudden emotion. "God bless you, Humphrey!" he said, then sinking back, he closed his eyes and spoke no more. Nor could Humphrey feel sure how much of what had passed he had clearly understood.

Late in the evening the messenger returned from Lille; he had been directed to wait there for the return telegram from La Chênaie. Humphrey's message had been addressed to Mademoiselle Mathilde, but the answer came from Ersilia herself.

"I will come," it said. "I will leave Paris by the train that reaches D—— (the station Humphrey had named) at eight o'clock."

As Humphrey read the slip of paper which told him that Ersilia was indeed coming, all the doubts and hesitations that had passed him by in the morning, came crowding into his mind. The difficulties of the undertaking, the length of the journey, Ersilia's recent illness, the chance that she might arrive too late—he suddenly felt as though he were responsible for them all. He had gone down stairs to speak to the messenger, and he turned now into the dining-room for a few minutes before returning to Mr. Fleming. His Belgian friend of the morning was there, reading an evening paper. He laid it down, however, as Humphrey came in, and inquired after Mr. Fleming with the same kindly sympathy that he had shown throughout, and the lad was feeling so lonely in the midst of his perplexities, that he could not help relating some of the history of these troubles to his new friend, ending with the message he had sent to the Princess Zaraikine. The officer opened his eyes when he heard what Humphrey had done.

"It is a long journey for a lady to take on so doubtful a chance," was all he said in answer, however.

"I know," said Humphrey despondingly, "and perhaps I ought not to have sent; only I felt so sure that she would wish to know, and that Mr. Fleming would wish to see her. But I daresay I was wrong."

"Perhaps not," said the officer; "in moments like these, people's feelings count for so much more than the ordinary facts of life, that very likely you have acted for the best. I was only thinking—" he went on with some hesitation, "the husband—Prince Zaraikine is his name? He is not in the neighborhood now, I suppose?"

"That can make no difference one way or the other," said Humphrey hastily. "A man who abandons his wife for six years can have no right to claim any sort of control over her actions."

"That may be true, my young friend; nevertheless a man who cares very little about his wife, may yet care very much—" He hesitated and broke off.

"What the devil do you mean?" said Humphrey,

flushing up. "You don't mean to insinuate that anything the Princess Zaraikine can do can be open to criticism in any way? If so, let me tell you, Monsieur, that this is language no man can use in my presence without answering to me for it."

"I mean nothing," said the officer in friendly tones, laying his hand on the lad's shoulder, "but to express my good will towards you and towards a lady for whom, from what you have told me, I entertain the deepest sympathy and respect. Doubtless you, who know all the circumstances, are the best judge of what is best for her interest and happiness, and I am sure they are safe with you."

He shook hands very kindly with the half-reluctant lad, and left the room.

Humphrey went up stairs again, feeling more utterly forlorn and wretched than he had yet done. The nurse went away into the next room for a few hours' sleep and he remained alone with his master. Mr Fleming was lying now, as he had done all the afternoon, oppressed and occasionally restless, but too drowsy or too exhausted to speak or rouse himself in any way, and Humphrey, with a chill sense of separation, began for the first time to realize that some doubtful gleam of returning consciousness was all that could ever be looked for again now, and that Mr. Fleming was already where loved voices can only reach us like dim echoes of the passionate emotions that once stirred our lives. With an impatient misery at the sight of suffering he could not relieve, the lad left his place by the bedside, and went to the window. . . . Humphrey was still too young to look upon death as anything but the destroyer, ready to snatch us and our loved ones from the familiar world. It belongs to later years than his were then, to recognize the benediction of that awful presence, in whose peace misunderstandings die away, estranged friends are one again, and our treasures of love need know no change. As he stood now, leaning his forehead against the chill window-pane, with thoughts that pierced through the darkness lying

around the remote country village to a lighted Paris street, an empty studio far away, it seemed to him that his youth had sunk for ever with the red evening clouds below the horizon, and that the starlit heavens above him were only an immense darkness across which was written in far-off passionless characters the history of all the years that he would have to live and to work without his master.

After midnight the sky clouded over, the wind rose, and the rain came dashing against the windows as it had done the previous night. This outer tumult disturbed without actually arousing Mr. Fleming. He became more restless and uneasy. "Oh, what a night to die on!" he said once or twice with an inexpressible pathos in his voice, and indeed towards dawn he became so much fainter that Humphrey thought death was at hand. He called up the nurse and sent for the surgeon, but the end was not yet. As the daylight strengthened, the immediate oppression passed off, and Mr. Fleming returned to nearly the same state as before.

"He has more strength than from his general appearance I should have thought possible," said the surgeon, about four o'clock that same afternoon, "it is the way sometimes with these frail-looking men. I should not wonder if he lives now till to-morrow morning."

"Do you think so really?" said Humphrey, "do you think that if I were to leave him for a few hours I should find him alive on my return?"

"I think it very possible," said the surgeon. "I should give him another twelve hours certainly, of gradual sinking, you understand. He will probably die very quietly."

These words decided Humphrey. All day he had been torn by the sense of conflicting duties towards Mr. Fleming and towards Ersilia. He could not bear the thought of being away in those last moments, when those who are leaving us seem to have the stronger claim upon us, that they will claim no more; but neither could he bear to think of Ersilia's arriving after dark at a strange place, with a long uncertain journey

across the country still before her. He resolved now that he would go. The train was to arrive at D—— at eight o'clock, and a little more than three hours of swift driving, which he would know how to secure, ought, he calculated, to bring them back to Z——. He would go.

He went down stairs and ordered a horse. He had been used to riding in his old days of country life, and it would, he thought now, be the quickest way of getting to D——. Immediately on his arrival there, he could procure a post-chaise. Humphrey, who had had little experience in travelling, had no doubts as to the wisdom of this arrangement, which allowed him to spend a few more minutes with Mr. Fleming, but which left him exposed to unforeseen contingencies, and of which indeed he had afterwards reason to repent.

When the moment for departure was come, he went to wish his master good-bye. Mr. Fleming was lying very quietly, a little turned on one side, with his face towards the window, through which came the late afternoon light; only a few minutes before he had asked that the curtain which shaded it should be drawn back. Humphrey sat down beside him on the edge of the bed, and took one of the cold, worn hands in his.

"I am going now, Sir," he said, speaking as clearly and as cheerfully as he could, "I am going to meet her at D——, but we shall be back again before very long."

"That is right, tell her I am expecting her," he said, without moving, but with a faint pressure of the hand. The surgeon was right, he was sensibly weaker in mind and body than he had been the evening before. "Take care of her Humphrey," he said, "and God bless you, my boy."

The dim eyes closed, the feeble hand relaxed its hold; Humphrey held it pressed in both his for a moment longer, looking down upon his master with an indescribable tightening of the heart; then, without another word, he left the room.

CHAPTER XXX.

“ From Dark to Dark.”

D—— was only a small wayside station, newly built for the benefit of a large manufactory in the neighborhood ; so Humphrey discovered with some dismay on his arrival. The village consisted of a few houses straggling along the road ; the only inn was a small public house. It was not a posting station, he was told ; it lay considerably off the main road, and the nearest place at which he could get post horses was at a large village about ten miles off, through which he had passed on his way from Z——. To get there he must go by cross country roads, as Monsieur had doubtless remarked. Humphrey had in fact noticed that the roads during the last half of his journey had been villainous, and the directions he had received so confusing that he had felt thankful when he at last saw the lights of D—— lying before him under the star-lit sky. He was angry now at his own stupidity in not having brought a carriage with him from Z——. The only conveyance the place afforded was a tumble-down vehicle, something between a cart and a gig, with a miserable horse. Humphrey looked at it in consternation, as he thought of Ersilia being jolted along rough country roads ; but there was no help for it now. They must do as well as they could till they got to the village above mentioned, and then they could post for the remainder of the journey.

He had timed his ride so well that, some delays notwithstanding, it still wanted five minutes to eight when all his arrangements were completed, the gig harnessed and waiting outside the station, and he himself walking

up and down the platform. The train was not punctual—that was not astonishing ; but when half-past eight came he began to grow impatient, and when the station clock showed that it was nine he grew alarmed, especially as all the porters had disappeared but one, who had settled down into a non-expectant attitude.

Humphrey went up to him, and asked the reason of the delay. Had any accident happened ? Not to the train, the man said, but through the late heavy rains there had been a slip in the embankment about forty miles off, and the train could not proceed. He could not say how long it might be detained, for hours perhaps ; it might not come on at all that night ; there was no saying at present.

The driver of the carriage came up to know how long he was to wait. Till the train came in, of course, Humphrey said, exasperated, nearly out of his mind at this unexpected delay. The man shrugged his shoulders. He could not keep the horse standing there, he said, it must go back to the stable ; when Monsieur wanted him again, he must let him know.

He drove off, and Humphrey remained alone. He paced up and down the platform, thinking of Ersilia watching through the night hours in helpless longing, whilst Mr. Fleming's life ebbed slowly away in loneliness, till he was ready to curse his own folly in sending for her at all, and nearly wild with the sense of his utter inability to do anything for either of them. All he could think of was to cross over to the inn, which stood nearly opposite the station, and order the best provisions and wine it afforded to be brought over to the railway waiting-room, so as to be ready for Ersilia when she should come ; then, feeling as though this preparation were a sort of pledge for her speedier arrival, he flung himself down on a bench to wait. How the hours passed he hardly knew ; he was not conscious of sleeping, but perhaps he did, for the shrill whistle of the approaching train came upon him at last with startling suddenness. He sprang up, and went out upon the platform. Lights were flashing, and porters

moving about. Humphrey looked up at the station clock. There had been a detention of six hours ; it was two o'clock in the morning.

What the delay had been to Ersilia was plainly to be seen in her face, weary, beaten, and of a deathlike paleness as she got out of the carriage. She gave her hand to Humphrey, and her lips parted as though to speak, but no sound came, and he replied to the unspoken words.

"Mr. Fleming is expecting you," he said, "he bade me tell-you so. They were his last words as I came away."

A strong tremor passed through her frame. "Tell me, Humphrey," she said, "is there no hope?"

"No," he said, "none."

He spoke out of his own despair which seemed to tell him what could be borne. He felt the hand, which still lay forgotten in his, quiver helplessly for a moment ; then she turned. "Let us go," she said, "this delay has been terrible."

They walked on together towards the waiting room. Behind them, stumbling and sleepy, came the faithful Roberts. "There will be a carriage here in a few minutes," Humphrey said, "the man wouldn't wait till the train came in, but I shall soon knock him up again. The waiting room is not very comfortable, but you will find some refreshments there. Roberts, see that your mistress takes something ; we have a long journey before us still."

He hurried off to the inn, but the driver, when at last awakened, was sleepy and grumbling, and it was nearly twenty minutes before all was ready and he could return to summon Ersilia. She was sitting by the table in the waiting room, in an attitude of enforced quiet, her hands tightly clasped, her forehead painfully contracted in already ineffaceable lines of suffering. She had taken off her gloves, but the food before her was untouched, and she rose at once as Humphrey entered. He put her and Roberts into the little open carriage, and covered

them with all the wraps and rugs that he could find; then placing himself opposite to them, they were off.

The night fortunately was clear, and though frosty, perfectly still; the late moon was still above the horizon, and lighted them during the first part of their way. Roberts in her corner was asleep again in a minute, and Ersilia leaned forward to speak to Humphrey.

"Tell me, Humphrey," she said, in a voice jarred with the effort she was making, "what was it? Why is Mr. Fleming in Belgium? What is it that has happened?"

"It was an accident," said Humphrey embarrassed. He had already said so much in his telegram to Mademoiselle Mathilde, but he had given no particulars, and there was nothing he more earnestly desired now than to keep from Ersilia, for a time at any rate, the knowledge that it was her husband who was the cause of Mr. Fleming's death. In his confusion, however, he stumbled on perhaps the worst words he could have used. "Mr. Fleming was called away suddenly into Belgium on business," he said, "and then there was an accident—a pistol went off—I will tell you all another time."

She grew still paler than before, and leaning back in the carriage asked no more questions. I believe she had no idea of the truth, that her suspicions pointed in another direction altogether, but Humphrey never thought of that at the time. He only felt thankful to be spared telling her the whole story; to conceal that, and the misery of his growing certainty that they should arrive too late at Z——, was all that he cared for just then. Absorbed in these thoughts, they went on for a long way in silence, the wretched horse stumbling over the rough country roads, till a more vehement jolt than usual aroused him, and he stooped down to wrap the carriage rug, that had become loosened, more closely round Ersilia. She thanked him with eyes that took an expression of concern as they rested on his face.

"How ill you look, Humphrey," she said, leaning forward again and laying her hand on his, "you have been going through a great deal, I know. I do not thank

you — it is a common sorrow that we share, is it not?"

The kindness of her voice and manner, the claim of fellowship with him in this hour of her own greatest suffering, overcame the lad. He took her hand, so white, so delicate, so transparent in the moonlight, and raised it to his lips with a sob. He hardly knew what he did. She disengaged it gently, then held it out to him again with a simple movement full of frankness. "And yet I do thank you, Humphrey," she said with a mournful attempt at a smile, "no one would—no one else could have done what you have for him and for me. I think my heart would break now if I had not you to depend upon."

He could not answer; he felt as though his own heart were breaking with conflicting emotions, and they went on again in silence. The night grew dark as the moon sank down; now and then they passed a barred and shuttered house; the noise of their wheels seemed the only sound left in a sleeping world. Once, as the horse slackened its speed at a slight ascent, Humphrey jumped down, and—as on a far off summer's night in the Pyrenees—walked along, his hand resting on the carriage, at Ersilia's side. Before them, one red light shone through the darkness; it came from a village at the top of a hill, the village where they might at last hope to get post horses for the remainder of their journey to Z—. Humphrey struck a match that he might look at his watch, and his heart sank as he saw that it was already past four o'clock; what hope remained? He fell behind the carriage for a moment as it climbed the hill. A breeze came shivering amongst the poplars and died away; far off, a dog barked and was silent again; the country lay dark and confused before him, the line of the horizon marked only by the slow sinking constellations. That sense of wide possibilities which appeals to the imagination in presence of a wide landscape came over Humphrey even then; for a moment a feeling of peace stole into the lad's heart, and the still, spreading

darkness seemed one with death that for ever hovers over life to harmonize and reconcile it. Then, all at once, with a keen, sickening pang, the immediate sorrow of the hour returned.

Amongst the fears that had lately been troubling Humphrey, was that of finding the posthouse closed at this early hour of the morning; but from this he was soon relieved. The light they had seen from below came from the inn to which their driver took them, and, early as it was, people were already astir. Men were moving with lanterns about the courtyard, a carriage stood there, and horses were being brought out. Some other traveller was on his way. They could have a post-chaise immediately, Humphrey was told in answer to his inquiries, in ten minutes, in a quarter of an hour, as soon as the gentleman who was about to start was gone. If he and Madame cared to go up stairs they would find a room with a fire and lights, and could have anything they might want.

Ersilia would willingly have remained where she was till the carriage was ready, but the driver from D—— was impatient to return, and they were obliged to get out and go into the inn. Roberts remained below, but Ersilia and Humphrey were shown up stairs into a bare comfortable room looking out upon the courtyard. It was empty now, but there were signs that it had been recently occupied; two dim candles burned on a square table in the centre, some wood was crackling in a stove, and there was a stiff arm-chair pushed back, which Humphrey pulled forward again for Ersilia. She sat down in it, and taking off her bonnet, leaned her head against the hard back, closing her eyes with an air of inexpressible weariness, of despairing patience that had almost reached its limits. Humphrey stood by her for a minute, longing to utter words of hope and comfort that would not come; then, with a movement of anger at his own helplessness, he went away to the window to watch the proceedings in the courtyard below.

Ten minutes may have passed. Ersilia had not

moved, but Humphrey who from the window could see the travelling carriage before the door still standing empty as when they had arrived, was beginning to grow impatient at the delay, when one of the house-servants came into the room with a card which he gave to Ersilia. She leaned forward towards the light to read it, then flushed up, and became deadly pale again.

"Humphrey, come here," she said, in quick faint tones.

She held out the card to him as she spoke. It had on it the name of Prince Zaraikine, and below in a well-known handwriting, a few words begging for an immediate interview.

"You cannot see him, of course," said Humphrey, "I will go and speak to him at once."

"No," she said, more firmly, "I cannot see him now—" then, with a change of voice. "It is too late," she said, "he is here."

There was a sort of ante-room opening out of the inner room in which they were waiting; the servant in going out had left the door between the two open, and Humphrey saw, at the same moment as Ersilia, that some one had come in. Without losing an instant, the lad threw himself into the next room, and closing the door behind him, found himself confronting M. Rossel. There was a minute's pause. The two had not seen each other since the memorable morning when they had parted in the Rue de Seine, and in Humphrey, at any rate, the bitter anger and contempt roused by that hour had not yet spent itself. M. Rossel was the first to speak.

"I didn't expect to see you, Randolph," he said. "I discovered accidentally that my wife is here, but I was not aware that you were with her. You are both bound on the same errand, I presume."

"Monsieur Rossel," said Humphrey, not stopping to choose his words, "let me beg of you not to go to the Princess Zaraikine now. She is exhausted by a long journey, and in great trouble."

"My good fellow," said the Prince, "if, as I suppose,

my wife is on her way to visit Mr. Fleming, you can't expect that I should see her take a step so compromising to herself and to me, without making some effort to stop her."

"You mistake," said Humphrey, too eager for the moment to resent these words, "it was my doing entirely. I found Mr. Fleming at Z—— dying, and I sent for the Princess Zaraikine, as the nearest friend he has in the world. You, Monsieur, who know all the circumstances of the case, should be the last to do anything to distress your wife further at such a moment."

"You go too far, Randolph," said M. Rossel, laying his hand on the handle of the door, "my wife's concerns are mine, and I can allow no one to interfere between us. I don't want to quarrel with you, my good boy, but it is as well that we should understand each other."

"I understand you perfectly, Monsieur," answered Humphrey, hotly, "and you are welcome to look upon my impertinence as you please. I am quite ready to take the consequences."

"Nonsense," he said, with a good-humor that exasperated the lad. "I am not going to shoot you, or let you try to shoot me, Randolph; Mr. Fleming was a different matter altogether. Now I must go to my wife; I have no time to lose."

He turned the lock as he spoke. Humphrey felt at once helpless and desperate.

"One moment," he said, setting his back against the door, "if you are determined to add to all the misery with which you have cursed your wife's life, you have the power, of course, and I can't prevent it—only for God's sake don't tell her it was you who shot Mr. Fleming; she knows nothing about it."

"How do you mean, knows nothing about it?" said M. Rossel, pausing.

"I mean," said Humphrey, "that she knows Mr. Fleming is dying, but she believes that he has met with some accident. I wouldn't tell her the whole truth; I knew it would only add to her trouble, which is heavy enough already."

"I understand—" said the Prince, "well, perhaps it is best so. No, I shall say nothing." He opened the door as he spoke, and passed on into the next room.

Humphrey followed him.

Ersilia had risen and was standing by the table as they entered, her hands resting on it, her eyes fixed on the door in an attitude of suspense and expectation. Some eager emotion passed like a wave over her pale face as her husband advanced, and paused opposite to her on the other side of the table ; but she did not speak, and it seemed a long minute before the silence was broken by Prince Zaraikine.

"It is some years, Madame," he said, "since we last met. I had looked forward to seeing you before long in Paris, but your unexpected presence here has given me that pleasure sooner than I could have hoped for it. You are on your way, if I am not mistaken, to see Mr. Fleming."

"I am," answered Ersilia. Her first emotion had passed away as her husband began to speak ; she simply looked utterly exhausted, sustaining her strength by a visible effort. "Might I ask you not to detain me," she said ; "as you are aware that Mr. Fleming is in this neighborhood, you perhaps know also that he is dying, and that every minute is of consequence."

"I have no wish to detain you, Madame," said the Prince, "on the contrary, I am myself obliged to proceed almost immediately to D——, and, should it suit your convenience, I shall be happy to offer you a seat in my carriage, which is at the door. But as regards Mr. Fleming, he has been, I believe, for some time recognized as your accepted lover, and you would greatly oblige me by abandoning your intention of visiting him."

The words were spoken in a tone of calm politeness, but they aroused in Ersilia a spirit that in a less absorbing moment would have been defiant.

"That is not possible," she said at once, her cheeks flushing again, and looking straight before her with clear eyes, "nor, pardon me, do I exactly understand on what grounds you make such a request."

"On no grounds, Madame, but the very natural ones that as your husband I am anxious to prevent your taking a false step which the world will know how to interpret, and which might materially modify our future relations towards each other. As your husband, I imagine I have a right to demand so much."

"It is a right you have neglected too long," she said, "to urge it upon me now. Mr. Fleming is dying; he expects me. Nothing can prevent my going to him."

"I understand," said the Prince, "you defy my authority."

"No," she said more gently, "far from it; but that is not the point. I have been the cause of very great suffering to Mr. Fleming, and he has claims upon me that must be first of all with me now." She hesitated, her whole face changing and quivering as with a rush of new emotions. "Do not misunderstand me," she said, leaning a little forward and with a touch of pleading in her voice, "I could have no wish to defy you, least of all at this moment. There were years in which I looked forward to nothing in my life so much as to meeting you again."

There was a noble tenderness in Ersilia's voice and manner as she spoke these last words that filled Humphrey with a sort of rage of mingled admiration and irritation. He wished now that he had told her everything, that she might have recoiled from this man, instead of appealing to him.

"Our former acquaintance was so brief, Madame," Prince Zaraikine said in answer, "that, much as I appreciate all that is flattering to myself in such an admission, I own that it surprises me."

"It could not be otherwise," said Ersilia. She paused, and checked herself in something further she was going to say, then went on again rapidly, as though moved by an uncontrollable feeling that had gathered strength through long years of repression. "It could not be otherwise," she said, "there was nothing I cared for so much, and I thought—it was a foolish thought, perhaps,

but it came to me when I was only a girl, and it grew to be the clearest part of my life—I thought that love and faithfulness and duty on my part could not fail in time to bring you back to me. I counted on the day when it should be so. I lived—I tried to live for you alone."

"Such constancy, Madame, is as refreshing by its novelty as it is unexceptionable. But that is beside the question now. Your conduct in Rome was a matter of comparative indifference to me. I had reason to believe, from what I knew of your character, that you would behave yourself creditably under the guardianship of your uncle and my mother; but you were not at the head of my establishment, nor had I at that time any desire that you should be. Now, however, it is different. I propose taking up my residence in Paris, and it would in every way suit me that my wife should take her place in society without a story attached to her name."

"M. Rossel—" said Humphrey, starting forward; but he was checked by Ersilia.

"Hush, Humphrey," she said, with a faint smile, and laying her hand on the lad's arm for an instant. Then turning again to M. Rossel. "It is too late," she said, speaking calmly, though her lips trembled a little; "it is now many years since I have had a story attached to my name. I was very young when you left me alone at Vienna, but not too young to be made to understand soon what sort of interpretation the world might put upon such an action; nor can you, Monsieur, have been ignorant of it."

"You had, at least, the sense of injured innocence to support you," said Prince Zaraikine, speaking more brusquely than he had yet done; "whatever the world may have said, you must have been perfectly well aware that you were not to blame. I left you because it suited my own convenience, not because you were in fault, and I have not hesitated to say so when the occasion offered. The case, however, would be different, should the story happen to be a true one."

The words struck her to the heart as Humphrey could

see, and if throttling M. Rossel on the spot could have helped her, the lad would have done it with pleasure ; as it was, he was obliged to remain passive whilst Ersilia spoke again with white lips.

"Such words cannot affect me now," she said, "I mean, to move me from my purpose—nor, indeed, in any way. There was a time when I cared very much what people thought and said about me, but now it is different. Life is so difficult, even to ourselves who know everything—how can it matter what others, who know nothing, say about it?"

"That is to say," said the Prince abruptly, "you have become indifferent to my honor and your own."

"You are wrong," she said, with patience and dignity. "Nothing that concerns you can be a matter of indifference to me, nor have I given you any cause to think otherwise. But there can be no question of honor here. Mr. Fleming—he is dying—"

She stopped, her speech cut short by sudden overpowering emotion. Her composure which she had maintained so far by a strong effort, and had thought, perhaps, to maintain till the end, gave way all at once and completely. She stood white and trembling her hands pressed tightly together in the struggle to recover voice and utterance.

"Our love has been a fatality," she said at last, in broken accents that gathered passion as she went on, "and it is he who has had to suffer. I left him when he most needed me—he gave everything for me, and I would give up nothing for him. I do not know how I can speak or think of anything else. What has honor, what have appearances to do here? He is dying—his life, his work, all have been sacrificed for me, and I have done nothing—"

There was a minute's silence, then Prince Zaraikine looked at his watch and took up his hat.

"If such," he said, "is your feeling, I do not know that there is anything more to be said. I am to understand then distinctly, that you do not accede to my request?"

"I cannot," said Ersilia; "God forgive me if I am wrong—I have cared for nothing so much in all the world as to do right in this matter—but I cannot."

"In that case, Madame, it is useless to argue the matter further, nor, indeed, have I the leisure to do so now; I have already lost too much time. But you will, at least, not hold me to blame for any reflections that may henceforward be cast upon your conduct."

He nodded to Randolph and left the room abruptly. Ersilia remained standing for a moment as he had left her, then clasping her hands tightly over her forehead with a mute gesture of misery, sank into her chair and sat motionless. In a minute, however, she started up again.

"Shall we never go, Humphrey?" she said; "this delay is maddening me."

They were off again at last, journeying as before in silence through the darkness. Humphrey knew that all was in vain, that they should arrive too late, and Ersilia, lying back in her corner of the carriage, never moved. The interview with her husband, brief as it had been, seemed to have exhausted all her remaining powers. The carriage rolled swiftly now along the smoother roads, but a pale dawn was in the sky as they drew up at the hotel. The diligence had come lumbering out of the village as they drove in, and the house was already awake and astir in the chill morning.

"Wait one minute," said Humphrey to his companions, as he sprang out of the carriage. He hurried into the hotel, anxious above all things to learn what had happened before Ersilia should come in. The nurse was the first person he met coming down the stairs, and he read the truth at once in her face; but he had no time to ask any questions, for Ersilia, who had followed him, was already at his side. Her deathlike paleness startled even Humphrey, as he turned and saw her in the dim light.

"It is up stairs?" she said; "let us go."

"It will be better for me to go up first," said Humphrey, hastily, "to—to prepare him, you know."

"No," she said, "he is expecting me." She laid her hand on Humphrey's arm as though to detain him, and ascended the stairs at his side. I think she hardly knew what she did, that she had no consciousness left but that of the intense purpose that had brought her so far. "It is here?" she said, as Humphrey paused in the corridor before the door of Mr. Fleming's room, and before he could prevent her she had turned the lock and gone in.

The room was cool, dim, and profoundly silent. A small oil lamp burned on the table, but the window was uncurtained and open to the dawn, and the grey light fell upon the bed, where Mr. Fleming lay dead with a tender and solemn smile upon his face.

CHAPTER XXXI.

One More Parting.

ONE bright morning, about three weeks later, the sad party who had made their way to Z—— through that long wintry night, were driving homewards through the Paris streets. Everything looked brilliant and sparkling in the early sunshine; the trees were budding on the Boulevards, there was a scent of flowers in the air, a sort of echoing joyousness all around. The spring had come and was everywhere, except in some sad hearts whose spring seemed gone for ever.

Ersilia had been detained at Z—— by a severe inflammatory attack brought on by the cold and fatigue of her journey. The hotel accommodation was wretched, the medical attendance not first-rate, and Humphrey had been thankful when, with the first rallying of her strength, she expressed her determination to return to Paris at once. The doctor at first refused his consent to what he called a mad proceeding, but everyone else felt that it was the best thing to be done. A sort of feverish impatience had taken possession of her, alternating with fits of silent apathy. Randolph himself saw her but seldom, but he heard from Roberts that she would sometimes try to pace the room till her strength failed altogether, and then sit for hours with her head resting on the old woman's shoulder. "Let us go away," she said, again and again, and as soon as she could be moved they went.

Humphrey saw his pale and silent charge safe into Mademoiselle Mathilde's hands, and then took his own way to the Rue de Clichy. Old Marguerite met him with red eyes, and burst into sobs when she tried to speak.

Humphrey wrung her hand in silence, and passing on into the studio, closed and locked the door behind him. No one had been there since he went away; a dusty sunbeam was streaming across the tops of the easels and a bit of blue drapery from which he had been painting, on to the white heap of ashes in the fireplace; all was empty, silent with a silence that seemed as though it would never again be broken. Humphrey sat down, and, laying his head on the table, sobbed like a girl.

It was many days before he saw Ersilia again. He called indeed regularly to inquire after her, and perhaps she would not have refused to see him had he urged the point; but he never did. He never saw anyone but Mademoiselle Mathilde, with whom he had occasional interviews. The poor old lady was as much broken down as it was in her nature to be by these fresh troubles, and liked to lay before him all the various grievances that went to make in her mind the sum of human woe.

"Ersilia is so changed, poor dear child," she used to say, the tears starting painfully to her old eyes. "I never saw anyone so altered in my life. She used to be always so sweet and cheerful, and now—it is very different. I should have thought myself that a little change and variety might do her good, but the doctors say she is to be kept quiet, so of course we can have no one in the house, and it is as cheerful as the day before a funeral. Not that it signifies much now. The best of the season is over, and it has certainly been very different from what I expected. If one could only foresee things, how much better it would have been if we had never gone to the Pyrenees last summer. The baths did me no good at all, and if Ersilia had not met Mr. Fleming she could take her proper place in society, when Prince Zaraikine comes back, at the head of his establishment.

"I cannot say I think *that* would be desirable," said Humphrey, bluntly.

"Not on his account of course, but on hers, poor child. She would be in her proper position, and we should at least know where we are. Whereas now, no

one knows what will become of us all. Then people will talk you know, Mr. Humphrey, and there are all sorts of stories about. Of course I don't tell Ersilia all I hear, but it is very painful, and not at all what I expected when I came to Paris. Not that I wonder at it, after that journey to Z——. I knew what would happen; I warned her of it. 'You don't know, Ersilia,' I said, 'you don't know, my dear child, what cruel things people can and will say.' 'I do know,' she said, 'I have heard such things said of other women, and may God forgive me, I may sometimes have believed them.' That was all, and off she went. It was perfect madness. For my part, I think she would have done better to remain in Paris from the beginning. If people are to talk, it may as well be about something as about nothing in my opinion."

If Humphrey could not sympathize with all Mademoiselle Mathilde's sentiments, he yet felt scarcely less anxious and perplexed than she did. Prince Zaraikine might make his appearance in Paris any day, and things could not go on as they were. He himself could do nothing, he felt with some bitterness; nay, any intervention on his part might be worse than useless. His youth and inexperience made him no match for a man like Prince Zaraikine.

Excepting in these daily visits, Humphrey saw hardly anyone at this time. He had a variety of business on his hands, and he shunned general society, shutting himself up, as far as was possible, alone with his troubles. Only once, as he was walking along a Boulevard, he thought he caught sight of Charlotte Grey, driving past in a carriage piled with boxes. He inquired of Mademoiselle Mathilde, and found that he had not been mistaken. Mrs. Grey was gone to Brussels; the apartment in the Rue du Helder was shut up; she would not return to Paris till next winter.

It was a relief to Humphrey to know that there was no chance of his meeting Mrs. Grey, though he was sorry to see nothing more of little Charlotte. But in

truth he had not many thoughts to spare just then in that direction. He was much occupied, as I have said. Mr. Fleming had no near relations, and it was on Randolph, in conjunction with his lawyer, that the immediate task of examining his papers devolved. His will bore date about three months previous to his death. It was very short. To the Princess Zاراикіne was bequeathed all his personal property, including the contents of his studio, with the exception of some casts and books he had thought might be of value to Humphrey; and Humphrey, moreover, was left a sum of money that enabled him to pursue his studies henceforward without difficulty, and in the way that best suited him.

A copy of the will was sent to Ersilia, and about a week later Humphrey, calling one forenoon as usual, was met in the hall by Roberts. Her mistress was better, she said, and wished to see Mr. Randolph. Would he come in?

Ersilia was in the drawing-room, lying back in a low arm-chair by the fire. She was very much changed; Humphrey could see that at a glance—a change hard to define perhaps, for she could hardly be paler and thinner than before, but one that made itself felt in air and gesture and expression. She held out her hand, and half sat up to greet him, but sank back again immediately with an air of languor and exhaustion that made the effort to speak in her usual voice the more apparent. A small work-table was beside her, and in her hands some trifle of lacework and embroidery in which she set the stitches as she talked, hardly raising her eyes.

“I wanted to see you to-day on business, Humphrey,” she said, after a few remarks had been exchanged. “I am going to England very shortly, and there are some things that I want to say to you and to do before I leave.”

“To England!” said Humphrey.

“Yes,” she answered, “my god-father, Colonel Sidney, has arrived. He has had an interview with my hus—— with Prince Zاراикіne; I have learnt much that

you kindly kept from me for a time, Humphrey, and I cannot—it would be impossible for me to see him at present. I do not know that I can ever see him again. All life is changed to me; fate is cruel, and one may struggle for years only to lose faith and love and one's belief in right and wrong at last; to fail one's self, and to see others fail one."

Her voice jarred, and her hand trembled a little as she took her scissors from the table, but she gave no other sign of emotion. Humphrey had no words with which to answer her. He was himself struggling to repress all expression of his dismay at her approaching departure. He had never thought of her slipping altogether out of his life in this way. He could not follow her to England; she would have no need of him there, and who could say when she might return?

"What is it that I can do for you?" he said at last.

"I want you to go with me to the studio," she answered at once, "that I may know what is there, and consider with you how everything can best be arranged. You are living there now, are you not?"

"Yes," said Humphrey, who, having given up his room in the Rue de Seine, had in fact, since his return to Paris, been occupying his master's old apartment.

"Then you will not mind going there with me now. Aunt Mathilde has gone to breakfast with a friend at Passy and has taken the carriage, but I will order one to be fetched at once. Will you ring, Humphrey?" She sat up and began putting away her working materials; her face looked so wan under her ruffled hair that the lad felt a sudden pang.

"Are you sure that you are strong enough to go?" he said anxiously.

"Oh yes, I am strong enough for anything I may have to do. And I think," she said, with the shadow of one of her old smiles, "that I have convinced everyone that I shall be all the better for being allowed to have my own way."

Humphrey, anxious and doubtful though he was,

could not oppose her wishes further, and they set off. She was still so weak that she was obliged to pause twice in ascending the staircase in the Rue de Clichy, but her courage did not fail her, even when the door was opened, and they found themselves in the familiar room. Humphrey had been working again, with how heavy a heart need not be said, during these last few days, and his painting things were all lying about. He cleared them hastily away, but Ersilia hardly noticed them. She stood still for a moment in the middle of the room, her hand pressed upon her forehead, and then began to walk round slowly, pausing before each picture in turn. There were ten or twelve in different stages of completion, one or two hardly more than sketched in. It was before these last that Ersilia paused the longest; but she did not speak till she came to the *Alcestis*, which still stood on an easel in its old place.

"This ought not to be here," she said, "how is that, Humphrey?"

"Mr. Murray was called away suddenly to Rome," he said, coming to her side, "and asked that it might be left till his return."

She stood gazing at it for a few minutes. "I wonder," she said at last, "how it would have been with *Alcestis*, if, instead of dying that a man might be given again to the world, she had seen a life filled with noblest work come to an end because she had crossed its path."

"He was content to die," said Humphrey, not knowing what to say.

"No—he loved his work, and the world is in need of it; nothing can alter that. A mind full of sublime and beautiful thoughts cannot be contented to perish from off the earth only half-recorded."

She turned away, and, sitting down at the table, drew a writing-case and inkstand towards her.

"I should like to make a list, Humphrey," she said, "then I can decide afterwards what shall be done with the different things. Will you tell me what there is in that large portfolio?"

She took up a pen, and opened the writing book to find a sheet of paper. With a heavy heart the lad lifted the portfolio on to a chair, and, untying it, began to turn over its contents. They were studies for pictures for the most part in red or black chalk, heads, draperies, detached hands, with a strange pathos of expression in their clinging, grasping, appealing action. Humphrey was still stooping over them, with his back towards Ersilia, when he was startled by the sound of a sob. He turned around quickly. Ersilia had dropped her pen, and was sitting with her arms resting on the table, her face hidden, her whole frame shaken by a deep convulsive sobbing. In her hand was a half-written sheet of paper, an unfinished note from Mr. Fleming to herself, begun and laid aside perhaps on that last morning when she had sent to him to come to her, and forgotten between the leaves of the writing-case ever since. It was only a trifle, but I think nothing else could so have moved her. The few kind, cheerful words, the familiar hand-writing—they had come to her suddenly out of a past whose records she had thought closed forever.

Her sobs were so terrible that Humphrey, after speaking to her in vain, called Marguerite to his assistance, then stood looking on helplessly till the old woman asking for smelling salts, he rushed away out of the room, out of the house, to the nearest chemist to procure some ; anything to be out of sight and hearing of a terrible sorrow he could do nothing to alleviate. When he came back, Ersilia was already better. Marguerite had got her on the sofa, and her convulsive sobbing had subsided into a grieved weeping like a child's, and for the moment as uncontrollable. In a few minutes, however, she began to recover herself. She sat up, pushed back her hair, and drank a glass of water.

"I believe I must leave all this for to-day," she said then ; "you were right you see, Humphrey, and I have only given you trouble." She stood up, shaking all over, and was obliged to lean on him as they went down stairs

together. I do not know that she ever entered the studio again.

Humphrey saw her once more before she left Paris. It was two days before her departure. Mademoiselle Mathilde was out, and she was alone when he went in, moving about the library, selecting some of the smaller and more precious objects that she wished packed away during her absence from home. She looked miserably worn and ill, but more like herself than he had yet seen her since Mr. Fleming's death. The force of the first shock was broken, and with the passing away of the immediate strain something of her wonted strength and energy had returned, something even of her sweet, unselfish cheerfulness. Ersilia was the last woman in the world to forget, for any length of time, that the living were still with her.

She said very little at first, however. Humphrey had brought her some violets, and sitting down by the fire, she employed herself in putting them into a little crystal cup. As the blue and white flowers fell through her thin fingers, Humphrey could not but remember a day, hardly six months ago, when in that same room Ersilia, with the clear light of love and youthful expectation in her eyes, had stood and talked to him over her roses. But it was of no use to dwell on the past, and standing opposite to her now, with his elbow on the mantelpiece, he began to tell her his own plans for the future. The lad had been thinking much during the last few days, and, not without pain, had come to some fixed resolutions concerning his future life. The whole of them does not concern us here. A new epoch, a man's life, was opening before him out of his past of folly, and darkness, and trouble, and his reflections, he trusted, were not unworthy of the occasion.

He meant to travel during the summer, he told Ersilia now; he could not bear the thought of his loneliness in Paris after she was gone, and it was his intention to visit some of the art galleries of Europe, studying as he went, and so make his way gradually down to Rome,

where he should pass the winter, he hoped, in hard work. Did she approve of his plan?

"I approve of it very much, Humphrey," she said, looking up at him with clear eyes that seemed to read and to understand all his thoughts; "I think it is the very best thing that you can do."

"I felt sure you would," he said. There was a few minutes' silence. "When are you likely to return to Paris?" Humphrey inquired, presently.

"I hardly know," she said; "I sometimes think I shall never come back to live here again. I am going now to my old home in Kensington; I cannot look beyond that yet."

"And Mademoiselle de Brisac—does she go with you?"

"No," said Ersilia; "she offered to do so, but I cannot have her sacrifice herself to me any longer. She has many friends still in Paris, and this winter has been very hard for her; she will find life easier when I am gone. My godfather will accompany me to England, and then Mrs. Sidney will come and stay with me for a time."

There was another pause. Humphrey was feeling that these last minutes were too precious to be wasted in ordinary words, and Ersilia sat musing in her old attitude, her cheek resting on her hand. Presently, however, she roused herself and looked.

"You will write to me sometimes, Humphrey, will you not?" she said, "I shall miss you very much; I shall want to know something of all that you are doing and seeing."

"May I write to you?" he answered, "it will be—there will be no other pleasure for me in life."

"It will be a pleasure to me," she said, "I shall often think of you. And this—this time will not last always," she went on with an effort, "the days will be less sad for you by and by. You will make friends, and you have your work—no, I am not afraid for you."

Her voice trembled a little with the last words. She rose and walked away to the further bookcase, as though

to replace some volumes, whilst Humphrey followed her with his eyes. In the midst of her own troubles, then, she could still take his future to heart, the lad thought, and for the hundredth time he vowed that no action of his should henceforth grieve or disappoint such sweet and constant kindness. In a minute she came back with a slip of paper in her hand, and a large old vellum-bound volume.

"I had almost forgotten," she said, "one thing I had to speak to you about. I want you to have this Dante, Humphrey. It is an early and rare edition, and one that my uncle thought of value, I know. It is associated in my mind with some happy hours that will not come again; I should like it to be yours. And this," she said, giving him the paper, "is a list of some volumes of engravings I should also like you to have. I was looking over the catalogue of my uncle's books the other day, and marked those I thought might be of use or value to you. I will look them out, and they shall be sent to you after I am gone."

He took the book from her hands. I suppose he said some words of thanks—he has forgotten.

"As regards the studio,—Humphrey," she presently went on, "I wish it to remain as it is—that is, I wish nothing moved away for the present. You will go on occupying it of course while you are in Paris, and afterwards old Marguerite will remain and keep it in order. Later on, I can decide whether I will have anything moved or not."

"It shall be as you desire," said Humphrey, "nothing shall be touched. And when you have any further wishes in the matter, if you will let me know, I will see that they are carried out. There is nothing on earth—"

He broke off as the door opened, and an elderly, white-mustached man entered with his hands full of papers. He came in from the drawing-room, and paused a moment at the sight of an unexpected visitor. Ersilia, whose face had brightened at his entrance, went up to him, and passed her hand through his arm.

"This is Colonel Sidney," she said to Humphrey, who had moved away from the mantel-piece, and now came forward, "I have been wishing to introduce you to him."

"I am glad to make Mr. Randolph's acquaintance," said Colonel Sidney. He was a man over seventy, with a clever, gentle old face, a slight quaver in his voice, and an odd sort of shy, straightforward manner, with a paternal kindness towards Ersilia. He had been an engineer officer of distinction, but it was now some years since he had retired from the army. His health was bad, and obliged him to spend the greater part of each winter abroad, and he had come now from Naples to arrange his god-daughter's affairs. "I am glad to make your acquaintance, Mr. Randolph," he said, "I have heard a great deal about you."

He shook hands cordially with the lad as he spoke, but Humphrey, who had taken up his hat, was about to go, when a servant came in with a message for Ersilia. "I will come," she said, in answer; then turning to Humphrey, "stay till I return," she said, and left the room.

"I have been to see Prince Zarakine," Colonel Sidney began almost immediately, "he is the strangest sort of scoundrel I ever came across. I never in my life met with a man so entirely devoid of the least notion of honor. I don't believe he understands the meaning of the word, or knows when he has done a dishonorable thing. And that sort of gentlemanly exterior that he has, makes it all the worse; one has to find him out. You know him though, I think, Mr. Randolph?"

"Yes, I know him," said Randolph, thinking of when and how he had found out Prince Zarakine. "What did he say?" he inquired.

"Well, not very much. I dare say he didn't think much of an old fellow like me at first," said the Colonel, smiling and stroking his mustache, "but we came to some sort of terms finally. Unluckily, though he can't touch his wife's fortune or property, no one can prevent

his spending every penny of her income if he chooses. But he has agreed to leave certain English rents at her disposal, and though it is not much for her, poor child, it is all we can hope for at present from this disastrous affair."

"I don't believe she will care much about the money," said Humphrey, sadly, "if Prince Zaraikine will let her alone. But he talked of wishing her to go back to live with him. In that case there will be no peace for her."

"He doesn't wish it now. He said—I won't repeat what he said; if we had both been younger men, I might have knocked him down," said the Colonel, "but it was to the effect that he had had an interview with his wife, and as he didn't think that they should suit each other better than formerly, they had better continue to live apart. I agreed to that, and so the matter ended."

There was a few minutes' silence broken by Colonel Sidney.

"Mr. Randolph," he said, "my god-daughter has told me all that you have done for her during this trouble that has fallen upon you, as well as upon her, and she has spoken of you in terms that make me doubly glad that I have happened to meet you to-day. If an old man's friendship is of any use to you, you may rest assured of mine."

"You are too good, Sir," said Humphrey, keenly touched and honored by this kindness. "I have done very little," he went on, moved by an uncontrollable impulse, "I am not worthy of your friendship, except by a resolution to do my best to atone for a great deal of folly and wrong-doing in the past."

"That is a resolution that may last all of us all our lives," said Colonel Sidney, smiling, "and I don't think the worse of you, my lad, that you have learned to make it so early, and to act upon it. This sad time would have been sadder still for my poor Ersilia, if she had not had you to turn to."

"I am very glad," said Humphrey, stupidly. Ersilia had come in while they were talking, and was standing at her godfather's side again, her hands clasped round his arm. Her eyes full of sadness, yet met Humphrey's with their old expression of frank kindness and affection. The sweet light dazzled and confused him. He took up his hat hurriedly.

"I must go," he said. "Good-bye, Colonel Sidney; thank you for your kindness." He turned to Ersilia. "Good-bye and God bless you," he said.

He felt the touch of her hand, he saw a last smile, and then as he went out into the street, darkness seemed to close around and upon him.

Two days later, Humphrey received the books of which Ersilia had spoken; they proved to be a collection of prints and engravings of the highest value. The gift had an intention beyond any that Humphrey thought of at the time. It was the first step in the renunciation of a long-cherished scheme, well-nigh impossible to fulfil henceforth, and it was characteristic of Ersilia that the recognition of her own broken hopes should take the form of a generous impulse to benefit another.

CHAPTER XXXII.

Absence.

It was in the last days of April that Rando'ph parted from the Princess Zaraikine, and it was nearly eighteen months before he saw her again. He spent the following winter in Rome as he had proposed doing, and after the first few weeks had no reason to complain of loneliness. Sterling was there, and one or two more of his Paris acquaintances ; Colonel Sidney, too, who did not forget his promise of friendship. Randolph began then the life that has gone on ever since ; he made friends whom he keeps to this day ; he sold his first picture, he went into society. . . . He had thought life over perhaps with the death of his master, but life has no such arbitrary endings ; and if the lad was often sick at heart with a longing for the kind voice, the generous heart that had been stilled in that far off Belgian village, if a melancholy that it was vain to struggle with, held possession of him and colored all his days, he kept his troubles to himself, and did his best to learn his work and do it worthily amongst his fellows.

He wrote often and regularly to Ersilia ; she was still the strong inspiration of his life, and I suppose there were few of his actions at that time that did not find their spring in the thought of her. Sometimes she answered him, not always ; but he wrote all the same. She liked receiving his letters, she told him ; she liked to hear his first vivid impressions of the Rome she knew and loved so well ; her old kind interest too in all that he was doing never failed, and her answers when they came were generally comments upon what he said. She

rarely wrote of herself, and of her life during these eighteen months Humphrey knew almost nothing, beyond the mere outward facts. Mademoiselle Mathilde joined her in England during the autumn, he heard, and after staying with her for a few weeks, accompanied her on a visit to La Chênaie. Their stay there was short, however. Ersilia returned to England, and soon after the New Year, she mentioned in a letter to Humphrey that La Chênaie was let. It seemed to her the best thing to do, she said, writing very sadly, and more fully than was usual with her when speaking of her own affairs. Monsieur Auguste de Florian was a second cousin of her uncle's, and the estate would belong to him or to his children at her death, so that it was only placing it now in the hands of its future master. He was a kind-hearted and liberal man, and she had no fears as to the well-being of the property ; but she felt as though she were forsaking a duty and a trust, and more sad than she could have thought possible at parting from the people she was learning to know and to care for.

"It was much the best thing she could do," Colonel Sidney said when Humphrey spoke to him on the subject. "Her husband wanted to turn the place into a shooting box, and set everything upside down. She couldn't have left it in his hands, and she couldn't have lived there herself ; she would never have been free from him and his friends. Now she will know that everything is being properly looked after, and can go there, moreover, whenever she likes."

During the following spring there was some correspondence, as Humphrey afterwards learnt, between Ersilia and her husband. Prince Zaraikine was then living in Paris, and either from a desire to torment his wife, as Randolph has been sometimes half-disposed to think, or more probably from a renewed sense of the advantage it would be to him to have a beautiful and accomplished woman at the head of his establishment, he wrote again to propose that she should return to live with him. Ersilia

refused, and the letters containing this refusal passed long afterwards into Randolph's hands.

"I cannot do what you wish," she wrote. "I cannot resume my place as your wife for the mere purpose of fulfilling certain social duties. I should be placing myself in a false relation to you ; I should be assuming an attitude of quiescence and submission, which with the memory of the past between us it would not be possible for me to maintain. Do not think I write this from a feeling of resentment. Such a feeling would be out of place in a matter that lies at the root of my whole life. . . . I hold that the tie between us is one that can never be broken. My money I leave willingly with you to dispose of as you will. Should you ever, through illness or distress of any kind, be in real need of me, let me know, and nothing shall prevent my coming to you. But I cannot consent to set myself to act a part I could never feel, merely that the world may look on."

In answer to a second letter from Prince Zاراikine she wrote again :

"You say rightly that my present conduct is at variance with my former protestations ; there was a time when I should have acted very differently. Nor do I attempt to justify my decision now ; it must stand upon its own merits, and many, no doubt, will hold me to blame. But my life is so ordered just now that it is hardly possible for me to arrive at any conclusion without much confusion and pain ; right and wrong are not always set clearly to the right hand and to the left to take or to leave. To follow what one feels to be the truth of one's own nature seems sometimes all that is left to one ; I have tried to do so now."

Of the same date as this last letter were a few energetic lines from Mademoiselle Mathilde, who was at that time with Ersilia.

"I do not know, Monsieur, whether it is your intention to kill your wife, but let me tell you it is what you are doing. She is so weak she can hardly walk from one room to another, or sit up to write to you, and if you per-

sist in showering letters upon her that harass her to the last degree, you may expect soon to hear of her in her grave. This will be greatly to your disadvantage, as you will then lose the use of all her money. In your own interests, then, I would advise you to leave her in peace ; it is hardly worth while to risk the enjoyment of an income like hers, for the sake of amusing yourself a little at her expense."

I do not know whether Prince Zaraikine returned any answer to Mademoiselle Mathilde's arguments, but they were probably not without their effect upon him. From whatever reason, his proposals to his wife were, I believe, never renewed.

It was not, as I have said, till long afterwards that these letters came into Randolph's possession. At the time they were written he had no idea that Ersilia was ill, no suspicion of it beyond an occasional vague uneasiness naturally arising when a longer time than usual elapsed between her letters. That she had never quite regained her former strength he might gather from one thing and another ; that she was seriously ill never once entered his mind. It was by Ersilia's own desire, as he learned subsequently, that he was thus kept in ignorance. "It would only trouble Humphrey," she said once, when Mademoiselle Mathilde proposed writing to him, "and I will not have him disturbed at his work. Some day I shall like to see him again, but there is still time enough, I think. He wants to travel in Italy this summer, I know ; perhaps I may get better, and then we should have distressed him to no purpose." She did, in fact, get better in the early summer, and went again on a few weeks visit to La Chênaie where Monsieur Auguste de Florian was now established with his family. But the change and the journey did her no good, and she was glad to return once more to Kensington.

"I am at home again," she wrote to Humphrey, "for I look upon this as my settled home now, and I am more thankful than I can tell you to have had it to come back to during these past months. No other place could be

quite the same to me, so cheerful and peaceful, so full of sights and sounds at once familiar and forgotten. All my childish days seem to come and visit me, from the very earliest dolls' tea-things, and there is not one of them that I cannot welcome gladly. You, too, have some such memories belonging to the old house ; some day I shall ask you to come and see me here—”

Randolph was at Genoa when he received this letter, the last Ersilia ever wrote to him. It was given him, he remembers, as he was going out one evening after dinner, and, as he took his walk along the ramparts that overhang the sea, he paused, leaning against the low stone parapet to open it. A ruddy light fell over the paper as he read ; a sunset was flaming up into the sky beyond the lighthouse and the mountains and the sea, a crimson flush reflected in the grey-blue waters ; a steamer was puffing towards the land ; far down in the harbor lights were shining, and in the peaceful glow of that lovely evening hour, Humphrey read the cheerful, playful words that made him feel happy in the thought that she, perhaps, was happier. He has that letter before him now ; the handwriting is a little tremulous here and there ; those words were written in the certainty that death was not very far off, and he had no knowledge of it.

Randolph himself spent the spring and summer in Italy, the autumn in the Tyrol. He had made up his mind for several reasons to pass the following winter in Paris, but when the time drew near for his return, an inexpressible reluctance seized him. He put off going from day to day, lingering on into October in the Tyrolese valley where he was living and sketching. At last the weather broke, and he had no longer any excuse for delay. He made up his packages, bade an unwilling farewell to the little sheltering valley, and two days later found himself once more in the Rue de Clichy. Old Marguerite was there to welcome him, the studio, warmed and lighted, stood open to receive him. No need to dwell on the sad memories that awaited him there ; they were memories that were to last him his life.

Humphrey had sent on before him from Rome a nearly finished picture that was "to bring him name and fame," he had written to Ersilia. He set it up on an easel on that first evening of his return, and looking at it again with fresh eyes, he felt that his twelvemonth's work had not been thrown away. He was no longer altogether a raw and stumbling student; he was beginning to feel and to know his powers, to understand the bent of his own genius. If he went to England, he would take the picture with him, he thought, that Ersilia might see it. He had hopes, plans, ambitions no doubt like other men of his age, but as he had worked and painted, it was still of her he had thought the most. To see her eyes brighten with a smile, to hear her say, "Well done, Humphrey," still seemed to him worth more than most of the prizes of life. He cared for name and fame most of all that he might stand before her and say "I am not wholly unworthy."

Something of all this flitted through the young fellow's mind now as he stood under the gas-lamp gazing at his picture. He must write to Ersilia, he thought, and tell her of his arrival in Paris. It was a long time since he had heard anything of her—certainly longer than usual as he began to reckon up the weeks in his mind. From herself, indeed, he had not heard since he was at Genoa, but a short letter from Mademoiselle Mathilde had found him in the Tyrol, and others might have missed him in his travels. Perhaps at her own house he might learn some news of the Princess Zaraikine; perhaps even Mademoiselle Mathilde might have returned to Paris for the winter. It was still early in the evening, he would go round at once and see.

He took up his hat and went out, looking with strange eyes at the familiar, lighted streets. Eighteen months is a long time to look upon at one-and-twenty, when each new sensation makes its own epoch in life, and Humphrey was still young enough to feel a momentary wonder that everything should look so unchanged in a world where so much had changed for him. It seemed to him

ages since he had last been there, and yet as he walked along, the past seemed to grow more real than the present. No step of the well-known way but held its eager memory, and as he turned the corner where he had been used to pause and look up, vaguely hoping to see Ersilia at her window, his footsteps stayed of themselves and he looked up once more, with a mingled longing and regret he cannot describe. All was dark and shuttered; that he had expected; but he had not expected the news that awaited him at the concierge's lodge.

Mademoiselle de Brisac was in England, the porter's wife said, and Madame la Princesse was there too now, but she had been in Paris a week ago. She had come over quite unexpectedly, accompanied by only the old *femme-de-chambre*; they had remained six days, and then returned to England. She had no idea what brought Madame over, the woman said; she had gone out the first day, but not afterwards; she had been too ill, she believed, to leave her room. She had looked more dead than alive, and the old *femme-de-chambre*, who was very unhappy about her mistress, had said that she could never be any better, and that the doctor did not think she would live through the winter.

This was the news that met Randolph; it was so unexpected, so bewildering, that the first shock was deadened to him by a feeling of incredulity. There must be some mistake, he thought. He questioned the woman again, but she held her story, and had nothing to add to it; and full of alarm and perplexity he left the house. He would write to Ersilia, he would write to Mademoiselle Mathilde, he would start instantly for England, he thought, with growing consternation, as he hurried home. He had not been gone long, but in the interval a letter had arrived for him by the late post. Marguerite gave it to him with an air of triumph.

"See here," she said, "you will thank me for this; it is an English letter, just what you were expecting."

"Let me see," said Humphrey, taking it hastily from her, too much agitated to give the expected thanks. The

address was in Mademoiselle Mathilde's handwriting. Good God! was Ersilia— He tore it open, and the first words dispelled the horrible fear that had seized him.

"My dear Humphrey," the old lady wrote, "we suppose, by your last letter, that you are in Paris again by this time, and this being the case, Ersilia asks me to write and say that she hopes you will be able to come and pay her a visit before you settle down to your work for the winter. I also shall be very glad to see you here, as there is no prospect of my returning to Paris at present; but before you come I think you ought to know what Ersilia would not let me tell you before, that her health has been failing rapidly during the last few months, and that you must expect to find her greatly altered. In fact she has never been herself since last spring twelve-month; and considering all she has had to worry her, and how she has worried herself, I am not at all surprised. If she would keep herself quiet it would be far better, but she is always doing imprudent things and then breaking down. For my part I wonder she has lived so long; she was always very healthy as a girl, but she is like her poor mother, and has no constitution to speak of. First, there was that journey to Z— (which I did my best to hinder) which nearly killed her, and now she is but just returned from another journey that she insisted on taking to Paris, when she was only fit to be in bed. But that I must say was entirely Mrs. Grey's fault; a more ill-bred, interfering woman I never knew; I have *quite* changed my opinion of her. She happened to be in London, and called here with that little Charlotte, whom, as you know, I could never bear. She had come through Paris, and her latest news was that Prince Zaraikine, who, as we knew, intended going in August to Aix-les-Baines, had been detained in Paris by a dangerous illness, that there was not a soul left to look after him, and that she expected every day to hear that he was dead. I didn't believe a word of it, and I told her so without hesitation; she was very angry, that little idiot,

Charlotte, began to cry, it was a scene that I cannot describe. Ersilia said hardly anything at the time, as is her way, but as soon as Mrs. Grey was gone, she announced that she intended going immediately to Paris. You must understand, Mr. Humphrey, that she had not been out of the house for six weeks, and that she does not even go up stairs now; she occupies rooms on the ground-floor, next to the sitting-room. You may imagine then our consternation on learning this extraordinary resolution. Even Mrs. Sidney, of whose good sense I have very little opinion, and who I believe in her heart would have had Ersilia go back to live with her husband on any terms, even she tried to dissuade her. As for me I told her the plain truth. 'It is not the least use your going, my dear,' I said, 'your husband will not see you, you may depend upon it. He wants you when he is well, not when he is ill, and besides, I don't believe a word of Mrs. Grey's story.' It was of no use; she listened to all we said, and then went her own way. You know what Ersilia is; if she once takes a thing into her head—Well, she went, and everything happened just as I had said. Prince Zaraikine was not dying at all, he was only laid up with one of his attacks of rheumatic gout; he didn't want Ersilia, and he refused to see her. As soon as she was able to travel again she came back to England, but she has been more ill since than I ever knew her before. She owns now that she was foolish, but of what use is that when the thing is done? To-day she is a little better, and is in the sitting-room again. She sends you a great many messages; your old room is ready for you, she bids me tell you, whenever you like to come; she wants to see all your Roman sketches, and to hear all your Roman experiences—"

There was a tremulous postscript added like an afterthought to this queer letter.

"Don't delay too long, Mr. Humphrey, she is very ill."

Humphrey had no mind to delay. He packed up his portmanteau again, and left by the early mail train the next morning.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

“Cover her face, she died young.”

It was already dark the following evening when Randolph arrived in London. A damp fog, a drizzling rain, seemed to meet and wrap him round as he drove out of the lighted station, and this dreary welcome after his long absence from England added to the dull sense of depression that had succeeded to the first excitement of his journey. His mind was busy with many thoughts as the cab slowly made its way along the miles of blurred houses and lights and trees, and stopped before the door of his old home in Kensington. It was more than three years since he had last been there, and then that door had been closed against him; he had come to see his uncle before going to Paris, and the stern old man, who died only a month later, refused to bid him farewell. If, like Ersilia, Humphrey had many memories of his childhood and youth connected with the old house, they were not all of them such as he could welcome. His uncle's harshness was not pleasant to look back upon, and latterly Randolph had cared still less to dwell upon his acts of kindness, which seemed ready to rise up and accuse him of past ingratitude. He could not have acted otherwise—so he felt—but that Gordian knot of incompatible conditions that we are ready enough to cut rashly when we are young, is what comes to perplex us most sorely perhaps when the rashness of youth is gone. Humphrey felt now that he would give much to have parted with the old man in kindness; it was a thought to sadden him even in the midst of newer and keener sorrow, when for the first time after years so full of change he saw his uncle's

house again. Only, when the door had opened and he was following the servant across the hall, all such memories faded, and in the rush of present emotion he saw no vision of the past but that of one childish day long ago, when a kind welcome had beamed on him from a child's loving eyes, when a small hand had been held out to comfort and cheer the lonely little stranger.

He was shown into that same sitting-room, with the long windows opening on to the garden. They were closed and curtained now against the mist and rain outside, and the whole room had a more cheerful and habitable look than formerly. A screen was drawn across the lower end, a book-case was placed in one recess, an Indian cabinet, brought from up stairs, filled up another ; bowls of autumn leaves and flowers were set about, and a fire piled with logs made a glowing centre of light and warmth. On one side of it sat Mrs. Sidney in her long black dress, stitching at some linen work with the swiftness of accustomed fingers ; on the other, reclining on a sofa half turned round to meet the cheerful blaze, was Ersilia. A reading-lamp stood on a small table at her side, but she was not reading. One hand supported her head, the other lay between the leaves of the half-closed book on her knee, her eyes, clear with a look of intent thought, were gazing before her absently. Humphrey, lingering in the shadow of the screen while the servant went forward to announce him, had one moment in which to observe this still interior. The next, Ersilia, starting at the sound of his name, looked up with a flush and smile that faded again instantly, and held out both her hands. The young man sprang forward ; for a moment neither of them, I think, could speak. Ersilia was the first to recover herself.

"It is good of you to come so soon, Humphrey," she said, "we had not ventured to hope for you yet. How was it you did not write?"

Humphrey explained that he had only arrived in Paris the night before, and had started off again immediately on receiving Mademoiselle Mathilde's letter.

"That is well," she said, "you could not arrive too soon for our pleasure. This is Mrs. Sidney, whom you met once before in Paris, I think. Aunt Mathilde is out just now, but she will be in by seven o'clock for dinner. She looks forward to seeing you again very much."

She spoke in a perfectly cheerful and natural voice that helped to bewilder Humphrey, to whom, after the poignant anxiety of the last few hours, it seemed like some dream, at once blissful and full of pain, to be standing there, looking at her again. She was not so greatly altered he thought, and then again she seemed to him but a shadowy likeness of her former self. Only when he looked into her sweet unchanged eyes, as he listened to the clear tones which, unheard through all these months, seemed to be vibrating from some remote past, he felt that the Ersilia of other days was before him.

"Sit down, Humphrey," she said, "bring that arm-chair nearer the fire ; you must be cold and tired after your journey, I am sure, and I want to look at you. You are changed," she went on after a momentary pause, smiling at him, "but not so much changed as I expected to find you. You have seen and done a great deal since we parted. We shall have long talks together ; I always think that people who know and love Italy acquire a new sort of nationality, and have a language apart, known only to themselves."

"I would have come before," said Humphrey, "I only waited for your permission. But I did not even know that you had been ill ; no one told me."

"It was my fault," she said ; "I would not write myself nor let Aunt Mathilde write, till we knew you were in Paris again. But now all is well, and I hope you will be able to stay with us for a while. We are a houseful of women, but we will do our best to entertain you, and there is the old drawing-room up stairs at your disposal if you have any work to do. Did you bring your picture with you?"

"No," said Humphrey ; "I thought of doing so, and I have brought all my sketch-books, but I came away in a

hurry at last, and left the picture." He did not tell her what was the fact, that he had felt too stunned and miserable the night before to set about packing it up. Of what use, he had thought, to bring it over when she might be too ill to look at it or to care about it? Now he was vexed with himself.

"I am sorry," she said, "I should have liked to see it; it is long since I have seen any pictures. But you will tell me about it." Her cheeks had begun to flush while she talked, and she leant her head back wearily against the sofa cushion. She had spoken with all her old cordial animation, but with a certain abruptness of manner that was new to Humphrey; the words seemed to come partly by rote, and to lie, as it were, apart from herself. It was the result of her constant struggle to assume an air of cheerfulness in the midst of pain and suffering, and Humphrey soon got used to it; indeed, I think that with him it presently wore off altogether, but in this first interview it chilled him. These moments of meeting after a long separation are always trying; they seem to reveal for the first time what that separation has been.

"You are tired, Humphrey," Ersilia said again, noticing his dejected look; "it is almost dinner time, and I will inquire whether your room is ready." She rang a bell at her side as she spoke; a dressing bell began ringing in the hall at the same moment; Mrs. Sidney folded up her work, and Roberts came in to attend to her mistress. Mr. Randolph's room was quite ready, the old woman said, if he would be pleased to go up. She had seen to everything herself.

He went up stairs to the very same room in which he had slept the first night twelve years ago, and which he had always occupied afterwards on his visits to his uncle. It was all freshly swept and garnished now, a newly lit fire was crackling on the hearth, and pretty new chintzes were shining everywhere in the cheerful blaze. Some relics of his boyhood were still there, a few school-books on a set of hanging shelves, some sketches done in his schoolboy days pasted on the walls. Randolph was

looking at these last with curious eyes and a heavy heart before unstrapping his portmanteau, when he heard a knock at the door. He opened it, and there stood Mademoiselle Mathilde, looking just the same as when they parted eighteen months ago.

"So you have come, Mr. Humphrey," she said, holding out her hand, and then all at once she had the young man in her arms, and was sobbing, hugging, embracing him altogether.

"Have you seen Ersilia?" she said, "have you seen my poor dear child?"

"Yes," said Humphrey, "I have seen her," and with the words all the bitterness of his heart seemed to overflow. He turned his face to the wall, and there was silence for a while—it was the very bitterness of death that swept through Randolph's soul; seeing Mademoiselle Mathilde so unchanged, he realized how everything else was changed. He knew that there was no hope—none.

"Tell me," he said at last to Mademoiselle Mathilde, "what do the doctors say?"

"How do I know?" she answered, "they have said a hundred things, that she would get better, that she would not get better—they never know what they mean. She was better in the spring, certainly better till those letters came from her husband, and now this last journey to Paris has killed her—not that there was much hope before."

"What letters?" Randolph inquired, and then Mademoiselle Mathilde, sitting down, told him much of what has already been related in the last chapter. Her husband had murdered her, the old lady said in her vehement way, as surely as if he had taken up his knife to do it. It might be so—Humphrey could not tell, and when Mademoiselle Mathilde began to give him some details of Ersilia's illness, he hardly listened. When death has raised his hand to strike the loved one, it seems to matter but little which weapon it is that he has chosen for the deed. Only when Mademoiselle Mathilde went on to say how much her poor dear child suffered, he turned away abruptly.

"Don't tell me," he said, walking up and down the room, "I can't bear it. Good heavens! why did I know nothing of all this before?"

They were still talking when the dinner bell rang, and Mademoiselle Mathilde hastened away. Ersilia did not come into the dining-room, and the meal passed almost in silence. The party was perhaps an ill-assorted one. To Humphrey, tired, depressed with his own sad thoughts, there was something confusing in the presence of the two women in the old red dining-room with its heavy curtains and sideboard, and the silver dish covers he had been used to see reflect his uncle's determined, wrinkled old face. Mrs. Sidney was always a somewhat silent woman, nor had Mademoiselle Mathilde much to say in her presence. She could not bear Mrs. Sidney, she afterwards told Humphrey in confidence, and indeed he himself had at that time no great liking for this lady, whose character he learned to understand and to appreciate better in after-years. Hers was at once a sad and a happy life; for if the path of self-renunciation that she had chosen amongst the poor and suffering was often hard and difficult, it was at least one undarkened by doubts, unassailed by scruples. She had the unquestioning faith which is sublime when it speaks from experience, and which often brings with it the gift of direct influence over many minds; whilst a loving soul, a gentle charity, kept her from passing too harsh a judgment on those who differed from herself. But she had few interests apart from her own line of thought and action, and Randolph was too inexperienced, too much absorbed in his own ideas and pursuits in those days, to be in sympathy with such a character as this. He knew moreover that in her judgment, Prince Zaraikine's wish for at least an outward reconciliation should have been a law to his wife, and that she ought to have returned to Paris when he wrote to her to come. Such an opinion on the part of her nearest friend could not, he felt sure, have lightened Ersilia's troubles, and for her sake he felt disposed to resent it. Long afterwards, circumstances and

the memory of their common love for Ersilia drew these two closer together, and Randolph, as I have said, came to know and to understand Mrs. Sidney better.

Ersilia was in the sitting-room when they went back there after dinner. The evening was her best time, and she seldom went to her own room till nine or ten o'clock. The days succeeded each other tranquilly in the tranquil old house. After the first, life began to go on again with Humphrey, and a little hope to revive. Seeing her, as a rule, only at her best moments, he easily let himself be deluded by the belief that she was less ill than he had at first imagined. She generally stayed in her own room till late in the afternoon, and he himself soon took up the habit of being out almost all day. There was something in the house that oppressed him, except when he was with her, and he spent most of his days in town, looking up his old fellow-students, revisiting his old haunts, studying in the National Gallery and the British Museum with new eyes it seemed to him since three years ago. Coming home through the long lighted streets in the evening dusk, splashing through the rain and mud perhaps, with the roar of carriages in his ears, peaceful change awaited him, as he turned in at the old iron gate, and passed through the hall into Ersilia's presence. Her face always brightened when he came in, and her constant kindness, her unfeigned pleasure and interest in his sketches, and in all that he could tell her of his life in Italy, made these hours that he spent with her some of the happiest on which he can now look back. She was somewhat changed he found from day to day; she talked less than formerly, falling readily into long fits of silence from which she roused herself with an effort, and abruptly as I have said. But when she did talk, it was with more unreserve than had been usual with her in old days, and between her and Humphrey there came to be by degrees an absence of constraint, a simple and confiding friendship that had never existed before. If Humphrey ever asked himself why this was, he took care not to answer the question. A little hope, I say, had

begun to revive. He knew that she was very weak, and often suffering, but with time and care, he thought she would surely get stronger.

That Ersilia herself had no such delusions, Humphrey might easily have gathered if he would from one and another expression of hers. She never but once indeed spoke to him on the subject, but half-unconsciously, perhaps, she had taken up the tone of one whose future lies within narrow limits, and if he blinded himself it was voluntarily. Once, too, he overheard some words that gave him a cruel pain at the time, though he is glad to be able to remember them now. Some words there are that, like psalms heard in a sacred place, recur to us again and again through life with a clinging melody of their own.

He had come in one afternoon rather earlier than usual. He had been lunching at Hampstead, at the house of one of his former acquaintances, a young fellow of about his own age with a troop of sisters to bid their brother's friend welcome. They were kind and pretty girls, but their joyous spirits oppressed Humphrey as contrasted with the rare and beautiful life that he watched fading from one day to another; he presently left them, and, making his way across London again, reached home about sunset. It was a mild and lovely day after a fortnight of almost constant rain, and passing through the sitting-room, which was empty, he went out into the garden to sketch. Everything looked red and crimson in the evening light, the red smoky sky behind the old brick walls, the apples hanging and dropping on the grass, the dim red and pink chrysanthemums along the narrow flower-beds, where some scarlet leaves were slowly floating down. Humphrey, seated on a low stone bench set against the house, was trying to catch these varied tints, when he heard voices at the open window of the sitting-room. He could not see the speakers, for an angle of the wall intervened, but he could hear the words falling with a sweet and clear distinctness on the stillness of the evening air. It was Ersilia who was speaking.

"You do not understand, Frances," she said, "even you do not understand, my dear, for you never could believe in my feeling for my husband. How shall I explain? I think that, when one is very young, one's feelings are a sort of religion to one's self. Afterwards, when one has failed, it is different. The feeling I had for my husband was a religion to me for nearly six years. I was so young when I married that I saw only one side of things, and resolution was easy to me. I thought, 'If I am true to him, he will some day repent, he will come back to me,' and I cared for nothing so much as that he should find in me a good and faithful wife—and when he did come back, it was too late."

Her voice shook and broke a little with the last words. Mrs. Sidney made some reply that Humphrey did not hear, and Ersilia spoke again.

"I do not reproach myself," she said slowly, "nor even, so far as I alone am concerned, could I bring myself to wish things had been otherwise. I think no woman could, whose life had once been crowned with the love that was given to me, and I cannot reproach myself now that my thoughts must always dwell most on that noblest life and love that were broken for my sake. And yet it has made my own life seem in some sort a failure. In all those years of separation it was my ideal to be an honorable, perhaps some day an honored wife. It was a girl's fancy that any faithfulness on my part could change the character of a man like my husband, but that yearning after the fulfilled duties of what I held to be noblest womanhood was no fancy."

There was a slight pause before Mrs. Sidney spoke again in clearer tones. "I think, my dear, your feeling is morbid," she said then in her gentle voice, "your girlish ideal was partly founded on a mistaken estimate of your husband's character. Your life is no failure because that has failed you."

"It may be so," Ersilia said, "but the feeling remains. I see with clearer eyes in these days; I know now there are some things that cannot be in this world, and to look

at things as they really are, and not only as one thinks they ought to be, is what it concerns us most to learn in life, I suppose ; but there is a time before that hard knowledge comes to one, that I sometimes think one values most of all. And now," she said, her voice changing a little, "all is over. I am dying, and though death is sweet, I do not greatly desire to die. I have done so little in this life where there is so much to be done ; and if, as I believe, a wider life and loftier ends than any we have dreamed of here, perhaps, await us hereafter, yet I would willingly have remained a little longer in this world that is known to me, and where there are common joys and sorrows that I still might have shared, and helped a little perhaps by sharing."

The clear tones seemed to vibrate and echo, then died away, and there was silence. When Humphrey presently left his seat, and went round into the garden, the windows were closed against the gathering mists ; no one was there.

He went indoors. Ersilia was in the sitting-room with Mrs. Sidney, the lamp was not yet lighted, but the curtains were drawn, the fire blazed brightly, and Roberts had brought in some tea. Humphrey could already have thought those sad words a dream. Ersilia, who had not seen him before that day, greeted him cheerfully. She seemed better than usual, he thought, and presently in the firelit dusk, she went to the long-closed piano, and opening it, began to play one of her old tunes. She played it half through, and then all at once her strength gave way, her hands fell on the keys in a jarring chord. She sat motionless for a moment, then rising came slowly back to the sofa, and lay silently with closed eyes for a long while. Later on in the evening, when she and Humphrey happened to be alone together, she said :

"It is strange to myself how little I have of the craving for death in the sense of rest that one so often hears people speak of. There was indeed a time at the worst when the longing for a darkness that should be unconsciousness, and not a blind struggling without light, was

intense. But that has passed, and I think could never return in the same degree. And life is still life, with good work to be done in it. People in their troubles sometimes say they have learned how to die; I think I have learned how to live."

"You will live, you must live," said Humphrey. He got up and went towards her. "You will live?" he said, as though she could have granted his prayer.

She laid her hand on his. "I would willingly live, Humphrey," she said, with an exquisite kindness, "if it were only to see your future; but that will not be. I have been wishing, though," she went on after a moment's pause, "to speak to you of that future. I want to tell you about that part of my will that concerns you." Humphrey sat down again, with a dogged resolution to hide the pain her words gave him. "This house and all my grandfather's money come to you, of course," she said, "you know I always thought they should have been yours," (long ago they had spoken together on the subject), "and now I am glad that you will have them. All Mr. Fleming's things I have left to you also; no one could value them as you will; and if, as you say is your intention, you keep on the studio in the Rue de Clichy, you will have no difficulty in disposing of them."

"I shall always keep it," Randolph answered; "if I am not always there myself, I shall not let it pass into other hands. But I shall be there; I intend to live in Paris."

"I am glad of that," she said, "then I can think of you as still working on there in the future. As regards what remains of my uncle's collection," she went on, "I have directed that it shall be sold, and the money will be devoted to building a new house for the school kept by the Sœurs near La Chênaie. M. de Florian tells me that one is needed; he is not rich, and will be glad of this help. It is not, as you know, what I once wished, but Monsieur de Florian did not enter into my views when I spoke to him on the subject in the summer, so I thought that this was the best thing to do."

"Good Heavens!" said Randolph, impetuously, "it is so hard that you have never been able to accomplish anything you planned and wished for."

"Yes, it has been hard," she said. "I think it is always hard to give up anything one has set one's mind on very much, and some of the things I meant to do seemed to me worth the doing. It had long been a dream of mine that the right understanding of beautiful things might help to widen and ennoble the lives of people who hardly know what beauty means now—I should have liked to be the means of bringing that help to those with whom I had most to do. Perhaps if I had been wiser in every way I might have accomplished more; it is hard to decide how far circumstances, and how far our own characters, mould our lives for us. But I like to think sometimes that the good intentions we could not fulfil never quite perish from off the earth, and if the good thing is done at last, we need not mind too much that it is not ourselves, but another who has done it."

There were tears in her eyes as she finished speaking. Mademoiselle Mathilde's voice was heard outside the door, and Humphrey had only time for a few words in answer.

"I swear to you," he said, impulsively, springing to his feet again, "if the occasion ever offers, I will remember your words, and do my best to fulfil them. And it will be your doing, not mine, for I should never have thought of these things if you had not spoken of them."

(Long afterwards the promise was kept—in what way, matters little here).

Humphrey had arranged to go down into the country the following day, to visit the old farm where he had spent all his earliest childhood. He could not get back till late in the evening, and he had been lamenting to Ersilia that he should see nothing of her all day; but when he went into the sitting-room before starting the next morning, he found to his surprise that she was already there. She had awakened to one of the fits of

faintness and oppression to which she was subject ; a painful restlessness had seized her, and she had moved from one room to another in the hope of gaining relief. Humphrey, who had never seen her like this before, was terribly shocked and startled. He wanted to put off his proposed excursion altogether for that day, but Ersilia would not hear of it. "It is nothing," she said, trying to smile ; "you will see I shall be well again to-morrow, and then I shall want to hear about all that you have been doing to-day." He had to make up his mind then and there, and half-reassured by her look and words, he went.

Two hours by the railway took him down to the little village near which his old home stood. The farm had passed into the hands of people of whom he knew nothing, and strange faces met him as he passed through the well-known fields and meadows, but the place itself was hardly altered from what it had been three years before. The people of the house were civil, and Randolph was free to wander all the afternoon about the familiar home where old thoughts and dreams and impressions seemed to rise up and meet him at every step. He lingered by the edge of the stream whose quiet ripple hardly stirred the broad growth of water-lilies ; he stood leaning in the sunset on the low meadow fence, listening to the faint, still sounds that came to him from afar across the tranquil country. He had left it all a boy, he had come back to it a man, and as he stood in the old orchard looking up through the thick twisting branches at the twilight sky, he felt that he had become a man through the force of a passionate love for one so pure and noble that his whole life hereafter should be the nobler and purer for that experience. A yellow moon was rising slowly behind the black hedgerows ; before him he could see the gables of the house, a light shining in the window of the little room where he used to sleep ; his mother's voice seemed to come sounding through the trees. A kind of sacred peace, of consecration sank into his heart, and has kept the memory of that hour apart from all others.

Randolph reached home between ten and eleven o'clock that night. There had been no earlier train from the remote country village, otherwise his anxiety on Ersilia's account, which had made part of his consciousness all day, would have brought him back much sooner. He felt no actual alarm, for he knew that she was subject to these attacks, which usually passed off in a few hours, leaving her in much the same state as before ; but the uneasiness he had been unable to shake off increased every minute as he drew nearer home. The doctor's carriage was driving away from the gate as he came up to it, and the hall door was not yet closed ; he sprang out of the cab, and hurried in. Mrs. Sidney was passing through the hall as he entered ; she stopped at once when she saw him, and replied to his unspoken question.

"Ersilia is better," she said, "the attack has been a very severe one, but Dr. X—— has just been here again, and he says he has little fear now of its not passing off as usual."

"Good God !" said Humphrey, "do you mean there has been any danger of its not passing off ?"

"There is always that danger now," Mrs. Sidney said sadly ; then, as Humphrey stood staring at her in horror, "I think there is no cause for present alarm," she said, "she is suffering much less now, and Dr. X—— gives us hope that with a quiet night she may be nearly as well as usual to-morrow morning. He is coming again in an hour or two to see how she is going on."

She was moving away, but Randolph stopped her. "There may be no cause for alarm," he said, "but I shall stay up till Dr. X—— comes again, and if—in short, you will let me know how she is."

"I will," she said, "but indeed I think the worst is over now."

She went down a passage that led to Ersilia's room, and Humphrey passed on into the sitting-room. No one was there ; it was lighted up as usual, but it had a deserted look, as though unused that day. On the small table by the sofa where Ersilia's books and work were

laid, everything was in order, the work basket closed, the volumes laid together, the table pushed back. A new chill struck upon Humphrey, still cold and shaken by the shock Mrs. Sidney's first words had given him. He shivered all over, and flung himself down into a chair in front of the fire to await the doctor's arrival.

"Is there nothing that I can do?" he said once, starting up as Mrs. Sidney came into the room for a moment. He would rather do anything, he thought, than sit and wait there passively. And yet there was no cause for fear, he told himself again and again—he took up a book, but he could not read; the clock ticked, the half hours passed monotonously. A profound stillness settled down upon the house as the night advanced; once some one came in to make up the fire, and then there was silence again. It somehow reassured Randolph. Twice he got up and went out into the hall to listen, but no one was moving; there was no sound but the sharp transient noises that make themselves heard in a house after midnight, and he went softly back to his post again.

This silence that seemed to assure him that all was going on well, and the sleepy warmth after a long and tiring day, had their effect on him at last. Without losing the sensation of being awake, he was dreaming that he was in the orchard again at his old home; but it was in the spring night now, the full moon shone overhead, and the trees, white with blossom, cast scattered shadows on the grass below. A nameless peace and joy possessed his soul; he saw his mother coming towards him with her clear, brown, shining eyes, and then he saw Ersilia approaching through the trees; her hands were filled with the blossoms, her face was more fair than in her happiest days. "You have come at last, Humphrey," she said in her sweet, kind tones. They sounded close to his ear; he awoke, starting from his chair, and found himself facing old Roberts.

"What is it, Roberts?" he said, hastily; "your mistress is not worse?"



"Oh, Sir, much worse," said Roberts, the difficult tears of age moistening her old eyes; "Dr. X—— has just been here again; he says there has been a great change in the last hour, and that she can't live through the night."

Humphrey staggered back as though he had been struck. What preparation avails to prepare us for such words as these? In a moment he recovered himself.

"I must go to her," he said, in a voice he vainly strove to control; "I *must* see her again—I—I have not seen her since the morning—"

"Yes, Sir, that's what I came to say, if you'd be pleased to come now. She was asking for you a minute or two ago."

Stunned and dumb, Humphrey followed the old woman into Ersilia's room. The fire was burning brightly, a shaded lamp stood on the table, and Ersilia, wrapped in her blue dressing-gown, was lying on the large, old-fashioned sofa; she had asked to be placed there when she was carried in, and they had not moved her since. Her head lay high, her eyes were open, her hands lay folded loosely before her. The look, at once weary and wistful, that her face had often worn in the last weeks, was on it now; she was only twenty-four, but it was a troubled life that was drawing to its close.

Humphrey went and stood by the sofa at her side, but she did not notice him till Roberts, I think it was, aroused her attention. Then she turned her head a little, smiling, and looking at him for a minute with eyes that already seemed to see very far off.

"Good-bye, Humphrey," she said; "I hope you will be a great painter some day . . . thank you for all your love and goodness to me—"

Some one led him gently from the room. He went back into the sitting-room, and sank down again in the chair before the fire. Oh, God! those hours of life when we would fain join hands with the loved ones in death.

He was still sitting sunk together over the blackened embers, when they came to tell him that all was over.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

Conclusion.

"THOSE whom the gods love die young."—To live long years fulfilled with honorable deeds in the familiar world whose sunrisings and sunsettings are known to us, where our little feet trod the daisies, and blossoming trees and spring hedgerows first transmuted life into pure gladness—this is to be blessed. But to die when the heaven of our childhood is still an open vision, when life is still a drama of intensest interest, and death seems less the consummation of fate than the triumph over it, this also is a blessing, and so Ersilia was blessed.

But those who were left behind?

Randolph went back to Paris to his empty home, to the life that he felt then would also henceforth be empty for ever. Those only who have lived and labored in the light of that noblest sympathy which inspires a man's highest work by believing in it, those only know how, when that light is withdrawn, the brain can refuse to conceive, the hand to execute. There were days that followed that Randolph does not care to dwell upon in thought even now.

Fortunately, perhaps, for him, there was business that he was obliged to attend to before long. Colonel Sidney was one of the Princess Zaraikine's executors, and, unable himself to be in Paris at this time, he wrote to Randolph, asking him to undertake the arrangements for the sale of Monsieur de Florian's collection. It took place about the New Year, and the money, as Ersilia had desired, was sent to La Chênaie, which had now passed definitively into Monsieur Auguste de Florian's hands. Of some other provisions of her will, mention has already

been made. To Prince Zaraikine was left about one-third of his wife's entire fortune, and amongst many minor legacies was one to Lebrun, which enabled the old man, who was soon afterwards dismissed from his post of steward, to spend the remainder of his days in comfort and independence.

One slight commission of Ersilia's, Randolph alone could fulfil. She had one day put into his hands a jewel case containing some fine sapphires in a delicate, old-fashioned gold setting. "I want Charlotte Grey to have these," she had said, "and I should like you to give them to her yourself, Humphrey, with my love. The poor child has been very unhappy, thinking she has done me some wrong or injury ; she writes me heart-broken little letters, and nothing I can say in return makes the matter quite clear to her. Try to make her understand how free from blame she is, so far as I am concerned, and that all would have been as it is, had she never met my husband."

Humphrey, on his return to Paris, thought it probable he might see Charlotte before long ; but on calling in the Rue du Helder, he found that Mrs. Grey was then in Italy, though she was expected back in the course of a few weeks. He put the jewel-case aside, and from time to time he called again to make inquiries. Mrs. Grey was always expected, he was told, till, late in the spring, he heard she was gone to Brussels, and would not be in Paris till the following winter. He then wrote to Charlotte, telling her that he had the jewels in his possession, and asking her what he should do with them, and received in reply one of her ill-written little notes begging him still to keep them till they should all be in Paris again, which would be, she said, in the course of a few months.

Randolph had almost forgotten the matter, when, as he was passing through the Tuilleries gardens one afternoon in the following October, he suddenly met Mrs. Grey. He would willingly have passed her with a bow, but she immediately stopped to speak to him, and he found himself obliged to stop also.

"Is Miss Grey in Paris?" he inquired. "If so, perhaps I may be allowed to call upon her one afternoon soon, and deliver to her the jewel-case about which I wrote, and which the Princess Zaraikine begged me to give to her myself if possible."

"Certainly, certainly," said Mrs. Grey, graciously; "she will be delighted to see you again, Mr. Randolph, and the jewels could not have come at a more opportune moment. You have not heard of her engagement, perhaps? that she is going to be married to Prince Zaraikine?"

"What!" said Humphrey. He was speechless for a moment with amazement. "To—Prince Zaraikine," he said, "you cannot be in earnest, Mrs. Grey?"

"Certainly I am in earnest," said Mrs. Grey, "why not? There is some disparity of age perhaps—but that is of little importance. Charlotte is no longer a child; she will be twenty-one in a month or two, and then the marriage will take place. It is high time she should be married, Mr. Randolph; a young woman in her position with a large fortune is exposed to so many dangers."

"But—good Heavens!" said Randolph, "you must surely be acquainted with Prince Zaraikine's character. You must know how he treated his wife; he killed Mr. Fleming in a duel; he is a man without principles and without honor."

"As for that," said Mrs. Grey, "I think there are two sides to every story, Mr. Randolph. I can never believe that all the blame attaches to one side, and we know that Prince Zaraikine was *shamefully* neglected during his illness last year. As regards the duel, I have heard something of it—but then you know, Mr. Fleming might have killed him. And Charlotte is quite devoted to him, dear child. The whole story is most romantic. I find now that she almost entirely supported him when he was ill and in concealment in Paris three years ago, and when his wife left him to starve. I could not imagine where all her pocket-money went to—she always had far too liberal an allowance for so young a girl—and I used

to scold her about it, I remember. But now all is explained, and she will be a princess. Her poor uncle would have been delighted, and really with Rose growing up, and coming out in a year or two, you may imagine, Mr. Randolph, how pleased I am to have Charlotte so well settled in life."

Randolph was silenced, and, full of dismay on Charlotte's account, not unmixed with anger against the girl for allowing herself to be led into such a marriage, he walked away.

Charlotte was at home and alone when Randolph called the following afternoon. He had not seen her for nearly three years, and he was at once struck by the improvement in her whole appearance. She had grown pretty; she was nicely dressed, and her manner was much less childish than formerly; a new atmosphere of favor and importance surrounded her, and it was one in which little Charlotte could not fail to thrive and bloom. Only at the somewhat cold greeting Randolph could not help giving her, she flushed and looked up at him in her old way, and the ready tears came into her eyes when he gave her Ersilia's loving message.

"I regret there should have been so much delay," he said, a little stiffly, "the jewels happily are unchanged, but the Princess Zaraikine would probably have worded her message differently had she foreseen under what circumstances you would receive it."

"Oh, Mr. Randolph," said Charlotte, so piteously that Humphrey's heart, which he had with difficulty hardened against her, began to melt again immediately. "Oh," said Charlotte, "I know how unworthy I am, I know I have made nothing but mischief from the beginning. I made the Princess Zaraikine unhappy, and I did him all the harm I could, so that I thought he would never forgive me. And now he is so kind to me, you cannot think how kind he is, and Aunt Maria is kind too now, and I cannot help being happy, though I shall never, never forget the Princess Zaraikine."

"If you are happy," said Randolph, "you have all

that I can desire for you now or in the future, Miss Grey." He hesitated for a moment as to whether or not he should give her a word of warning ; but of what use ? Mrs. Grey was the girl's responsible guardian, and with her, and Prince Zaraikine, and Charlotte herself against him, Randolph felt that any words of his might be worse than useless. He held out his hand. "Goodbye, Miss Grey," was all he said, "I hope we shall always be friends, and if I can ever do you the least service, you will remember that it will give me a great deal of pleasure."

"I will, I will," she said. "I shall always remember how good you were to me, Mr. Randolph, and to him too. He has told me that."

Randolph went away sorry, as he had often been before, for the poor little girl, who, if she should live to be a hundred, would never, he felt, gain much wisdom. But he is glad to know that her fate has been happier than might have been anticipated from her girlish antecedents. She married Prince Zaraikine the following Christmas ; he was not unkind to her, I believe, and he died at Vienna about two years later, before he had had time to spend all her money. Charlotte married an Austrian officer shortly afterwards, and in the society of her many babies spent happy years after the troubles of her girlhood. Only last spring, as Randolph was at work one day in the studio, a knock came at the door, and a card inscribed with the name of Adolf von D—— was brought in, followed by a fair, stalwart, yellow-haired youth of eighteen or nineteen. "My mother bade me be sure to come and see you," he said in broken German-French, and as soon as Randolph understood who he was, he gave a hearty welcome to Charlotte's eldest son. He was come to see Paris, he said, and Randolph did what he could in taking him about and helping him during the few weeks that he was there. He was a good-tempered fellow, without too many brains, and it was characteristic of Charlotte that he could not speak a word of English ; she had never taken the trouble to

teach him. Of the circumstances of his mother's early life and first marriage he knew nothing, but he always spoke of her with enthusiasm, and when Randolph showed him a drawing he had made of her in her girlhood, he declared that she was not in the least altered, only grown a little stouter. Charlotte herself, Randolph never has seen, and, indeed, does not greatly care to see again. He is content that the little April face he once knew should remain associated in his mind with some of the sweetest and darkest hours of his life.

Mademoiselle Mathilde returned to live in Paris immediately after Ersilia's death. As often happens with old people, she felt that death less than might have been expected, and, her taste for society soon reviving, she found plenty of amusement and occupation during the remaining years of her life. She also became *dévoté*, and her kindly nature asserting itself, gave much time and money to different charities. Only, as she grew older, there was nothing, she declared, that she enjoyed so much as having an hour's chat about her dear child and old times with Mr. Humphrey, as she always called Randolph. She lived not unhappily to a great age, dying peacefully one day at last in her arm-chair.

Lebrun, whom Randolph saw on an occasional visit to La Chênaie, also lived to be very old, and forgetting all the opposition with which he had once vexed his mistress's soul, always spoke of the few months she had lived on her estates as the golden days of his life. Indeed Ersilia's mistakes, if she ever made any, are forgotten at La Chênaie now, and in all the country she is remembered only as the sweet and beautiful lady, who in the bad fever-season years ago, took the sick into her own house, and there herself watched by them and tended them with her own hands. If Ersilia herself would fain have left other memories than these, memories of work accomplished, and noble dreams nobly fulfilled, yet these memories also are sweet and worthy, and her name is blessed amongst the people whom she loved.

As regards myself, little remains to be told. Such

work as I have done is before the world, and it was not to record my own history that I sat down to write these pages. Of my subsequent life, let those who will, learn what they may from the early pages of this story. My daughter Fanny, when she is old enough to read this record of her father's writing, will still dimly remember the mother whom she lost when she was but six years old. Let her ever cherish the memory of that mother whom she strongly resembles, and who had a passionate grief in dying at the thought of parting with her little daughter. For myself, I say, the tale is told. Those early years took from me something that can never come again, but they left me a memory that I have sometimes held to be the most precious possession of my life.

THE END

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